

Bad Seed



a play by *Maxwell Anderson*
based on the novel by *WILLIAM MARCH*

BAD SEED

By Maxwell Anderson

Can a child be born evil? This disturbing question underlies the startling events of a new play, based on the best-selling novel by William March. Mr. Anderson, with his superb gifts as a dramatist, has turned a powerful novel into a still more powerful play.

"Written with reserve and skill, 'Bad Seed' is an extraordinarily literate horror story and a superior bit of theatre . . . But the plot is not the only virtue of the play. For 'Bad Seed' is a perceptive drama that is equally interested in the frightful tragedy of a mother who takes the responsibility for her daughter's guilt, continues to love her daughter and tries desperately and selflessly to administer justice to everyone. It is a shattering story, largely because it involves such decent people." —ATKINSON, *N. Y. Times*

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"A genuine fourteen-carat, fifteen-below chiller . . . thrilling entertainment."—"As a work of purely theatrical excitement, it is beautifully carpentered, suspensefully acted, craftily sustained—"Bad Seed" is an ingenious piece of straight showmanship."

—WALTER KERR, *New York Herald Tribune*

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"'Bad Seed' is a double-decked rouser—a sock melodrama and an absorbing study in crime. There's a single word for this play: Wow!"

—RICHARD L. COE, *The Washington Post*

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Bad seed

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BAD SEED

BAD SEED

A play in two acts

B Y

MAXWELL ANDERSON

The dramatization of William March's novel

THE BAD SEED

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY · NEW YORK

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BAD SEED had its first performance in New York at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre December 8, 1954, when the play was produced by The Playwrights' Company, Inc., and directed by Reginald Denham, with the following cast:

Rhoda Penmark	Patty McCormack
Col. Kenneth Penmark	John O'Hare
Christine Penmark	Nancy Kelly
Monica Breedlove	Evelyn Varden
Emory Wages	Joseph Holland
Leroy	Henry Jones
Miss Fern	Joan Croydon
Reginald Tasker	Lloyd Gough
Mrs. Daigle	Eileen Heckart
Mr. Daigle	Wells Richardson
Messenger	George Gino
Richard Bravo	Thomas Chalmers

BAD SEED

Act One

SCENE 1

The one set is the apartment of Colonel and Mrs. Penmark, in a suburb of a southern city. We see a tastefully furnished living room, with colonial pieces and reproductions, expensive but not too gaudy. The pictures on the walls are views of New York City in the early nineteenth century. The door to the front hall is at stage left, the door to an inner hallway at stage right, a door to the kitchen—which is partially visible—is at right rear, a door to a den containing a piano is at left rear. Large windows with heavy drapes flood the room with early morning light. There is a dining table at the bay window with chairs about it, a couch at the left with a coffee table near by. There are two or three easy chairs in a semi-circle facing the coffee table. A rug on the floor is vari-colored rag colonial.

Rhoda Penmark, a neat, quaint and pretty little girl of eight, sits, seriously reading a book, on the chair right. She turns a page carefully, absorbed in the story. Colonel Kenneth Penmark, a good-looking officer of thirty-five or so, comes in from the right, carrying two fairly new suitcases. He sets them down near the outer door and turns, seeing Rhoda.

KENNETH Why, 'morning, Rhoda! Up, and dressed and ready for the day! Wearing your best perfume?

- RHODA *[Ma·king her place]* Yes, I am, daddy.
- KENNETH That's right, this is the day of the picnic. I hope there's a breeze off the water.
- RHODA Miss Fern says there always is.
- KENNETH She says it never rains on the first of June, too. Don't count on it.
- RHODA Are you leaving today, daddy?
- KENNETH My plane goes in an hour. Back to Washington and the Pentagon and a climate that coddles eggs.
- RHODA I like coddled eggs.
- KENNETH You like everything. You're just too good to be true.

[He pulls her braids, and she smiles up at him]
- RHODA How long will you be gone?
- KENNETH Sealed orders, darling. All I know is I'll be home as soon as I can. What will you give me if I give you a basket of kisses?
- RHODA I'll give you a basket of hugs.

[He leans down to hug and kiss her]
- KENNETH I like your hugs.
- RHODA I like your kisses, daddikins! You're so big and strong!
- KENNETH I'll miss you. The General doesn't have one pretty girl on his whole staff!
- RHODA I wish he didn't have my daddy! I'll miss you every day!
- KENNETH Will you write to me?

RHODA Do you want me to?

KENNETH Of course I want you to.

RHODA Then I'll write to you every day.

KENNETH Every time I write to mother I'll put in a note for you!

RHODA Will you really?

KENNETH Really and truly. And every time the General tells a good joke I'll send you an official report!

RHODA Oh, daddy, that won't be very often! You'd better send me the bad ones too!

KENNETH Sweetheart, I will!

[MRS. PENMARK comes in from the den in a becoming morning gown. She is somewhat under thirty, a very pretty, gentle and gracious woman, quite obviously dedicated to her husband and child. The kind of woman whose life is given meaning by the affection she gives and receives]

I shall write daily to both my sweethearts unless somebody makes a mistake and starts a shooting war and we all have to go underground.

[He kisses Christine, his wife, who has brought his briefcase and goes into his arms without a word. They have said goodbye previously, but she can't let him go without another embrace]

RHODA Would you go underground if there was a war?

KENNETH Yes, I would, and, by gum, I'd go fast!

RHODA You said "by gum" because I was here.

KENNETH That's right, I did.

CHRISTINE Take care.

- KENNETH I will. I'll wire you the minute we're on the ground. Take care of each other, you two.
- CHRISTINE We will.
[*The doorbell rings a delicate little chime*]
That's Monica and Emory. They wanted to say a last goodbye to you.
- KENNETH Oh.

[*He goes to the door. Meanwhile CHRISTINE looks at Rhoda's hair*]
- RHODA Is it all right?
- CHRISTINE It's perfect, darling, braids and all.
- KENNETH [*At the door*] Come in, Monica. Come in, Emory.

[*Mrs. Monica Breedlove is a widow of fifty-five or so, plump, intelligent, voluble and perhaps over-friendly. Her brother, Emory Wages, is a few years younger than she, also plump and friendly, but in contrast almost taciturn*]
- MONICA Just the effusive neighbors from upstairs, darlings! Have to be in on everything. No lives of their own, so they live other people's. I speak for my brother as well as myself, because he never gets a chance to speak when I'm around. There, I've talked enough. Say something, Colonel.
- KENNETH I guess it will have to be goodbye, because the taxi's here and I don't want to rush through traffic.
- EMORY Don't worry about your two pretty girls, Ken. We'll keep an eye on them, and if one of them begins to look peaked, we'll send up smoke signals.
- KENNETH I'm counting on you, Emory.
[*He gives Monica his hand*]
And on Monica.

MONICA Goodbye.

KENNETH Well, sweetheart, this is it.
 [He waves across the room to Rhoda]
 Goodbye, big eyes!

RHODA Goodbye, daddy.

CHRISTINE I promised myself I wouldn't come down, but—

KENNETH Don't, sweet. It's just another empty month or two.
 We'll get through them somehow.

EMORY I'm taking these.

[He precedes Kenneth out with both bags. KENNETH and CHRISTINE embrace]

KENNETH Goodbye.

[KENNETH takes his briefcase and goes out]

MONICA Poor boy. He hates to go. And you hate to let him go.

CHRISTINE I'm—not very self-sufficient.

MONICA You're in love, both of you, you lucky characters. I wish I were. Oh, by the way, nobody has to take Rhoda to the bus, because I made some cupcakes for Miss Fern, and she's coming by to pick them up.

CHRISTINE Oh, good.

MONICA *[To Rhoda]* But before she comes I have two little presents for you, my darling.

RHODA Presents?

MONICA The first is from Emory. It's a pair of dark glasses with rhinestone decorations, and he said to tell you they're intended to keep the sun out of those pretty blue eyes.
 [She produces the glasses, and RHODA goes toward her with an eager expression which her mother knows as

Rhoda's "acquisitive look"]

I'll try them on you.

[RHODA stands obediently while MONICA adjusts the glasses]

Now who is this glamorous Hollywood actress? Can it really be little Rhoda Penmark who lives with her delightful parents on the first floor of my apartment house?

RHODA [Looking at her reflection in the glass of a picture]
I like them. Where's the case?

MONICA Here it is. And now for the second prize, which is from me.

[She takes from her purse a little gold heart with a chain attached]

This was given to me when I was eight years old, and it's a little young for me now, but it's still just right for an eight-year-old. However, it has a garnet set in it, and we'll have to change that for a turquoise, since turquoise is your birthstone. So I'll have it changed and cleaned, and then it's yours.

RHODA Could I have both stones? The garnet, too?

CHRISTINE Rhoda! Rhoda! What a—

MONICA [Laughing] But of course you may! How wonderful to meet such a natural little girl! She knows what she wants and asks for it—not like these over-civilized little pets that have to go through analysis before they can choose an ice cream soda!

[RHODA goes to her, puts her arms round her waist and hugs her with an intensity which gives Monica great delight]

RHODA [Purring] Aunt Monica! Dear, sweet Aunt Monica!

[MONICA is completely captivated, but CHRISTINE looks on with a slightly skeptical and concerned attitude. She knows that Rhoda is not really affectionate, that she is acting]

MONICA I know I'm behind the times, but I thought children wore coveralls and play-suits to picnics. Now you, my love, look like a princess in that red and white dotted Swiss. Tell me, aren't you afraid you'll get it dirty? Or fall and scuff those new shoes?

CHRISTINE She won't soil the dress and she won't scuff the shoes. Rhoda never gets anything dirty, though how she manages it, I don't know.

RHODA I don't like coveralls. They're not—

[She hesitates]

MONICA You mean coveralls aren't quite ladylike, don't you, my darling?

[She embraces the tolerant Rhoda again]

Oh, you old-fashioned little dear!

RHODA *[Looking at the locket]* Am I to keep this now?

MONICA You're to keep it till I find out where I can get the stone changed.

RHODA Then I'll put it in my box.

[She goes to her table, opens a drawer and takes out a box which once held Swiss chocolates. She opens it and places the locket carefully inside.]

A voice says "Leroy" as the door swings open. The house-man, or JANITOR, stands in the doorway]

LEROY *[The Janitor]* Guess I'm pretty early, Mrs. Penmark, but it's my day for doing the windows on this side.

CHRISTINE Oh, yes, you can begin in the bedrooms, Leroy.

LEROY *[To Monica]* Excuse me, ma'am.

[To Rhoda] Mornin'.

[He crosses through to the inner hall with pail and paraphernalia. RHODA skips across the room]

- RHODA I like garnets, but I like turquoise better.
- MONICA You sound like Fred Astaire, tap-tapping across the room. What have you got on your shoes?
- RHODA I run over my heels, and mother had these iron pieces put on so they'd last longer.
- CHRISTINE I'm afraid I can't take any credit. It was Rhoda's idea entirely.
- RHODA I think they're very nice. They save money.
- MONICA Oh, you penurious little sweetheart! But I'll tell you one thing, Rhoda, I think you worry too much when you're not the very best at everything. That's one reason Emory and I thought you should have some presents today. You wanted that penmanship medal very much, didn't you?
- RHODA It's the only gold medal Miss Fern gives. And it was really mine. Everybody knew I wrote the best hand and I should have had it.
- [LEROY comes through toward the kitchen with his pail]
- LEROY 'Scuse me, just gettin' some water.
- [He goes to the kitchen]
- RHODA I just don't see why Claude Daigle got the medal.
- CHRISTINE These things happen to us all the time, Rhoda, and when they do we simply accept them. I've told you to forget the whole thing.
[She puts an arm around Rhoda, trying to soften her. RHODA pulls away impatiently]
I'm sorry. I know you don't like people pawing over you.
- RHODA It was mine! The medal was mine!
- CHRISTINE Try to forget it, Rhoda. Put it out of your mind.

RHODA *[Stamping in anger]* I won't! I won't! I won't!

[LEROY comes out of the kitchen with his pail, passes near Rhoda, and manages to spill a splash of water on her shoes]

MONICA Leroy! Have you completely lost your senses? You spilled water on Rhoda's shoes!

LEROY I'm sorry, ma'am. I guess I was just trying to hurry.
[In turning he spills more water on the floor near Christine]

MONICA Leroy!

LEROY I'm sorry, Mis' Breedlove.

[Kneels]

MONICA *[Under her breath]* One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten! Leroy, I own this apartment house! I employ you! I've tried to give you the benefit of every doubt! I've thought of you as emotionally immature, torn by irrational rages, a bit on the psychopathic side! But after this demonstration I think my diagnosis was entirely too mild! You're definitely a schizophrenic with paranoid overtones! I've had quite enough of your discourtesy and surliness—and so have the tenants in the building! My brother Emory has wanted to discharge you! I've been on your side, though with misgivings! I shall protect you no longer!

CHRISTINE He didn't mean it, Monica. It was an accident, I'm sure it was.

RHODA He meant to do it. I know Leroy well.

MONICA It was no accident, Christine! It was deliberate—the spiteful act of a neurotic child!

RHODA He meant to do it. *[To Leroy]* You made up your mind to do it when you went through the room.

CHRISTINE Rhoda!

RHODA I was looking at you when you made up your mind to wet us.

LEROY Oh, I never, I never, I'm just clumsy!

[He takes out his handkerchief and cleans Rhoda's shoes]

CHRISTINE *[Not wishing the man to humble himself]* Oh, Leroy, please, please!

[RHODA draws away]

MONICA My patience is at an end, and you may as well know it. Go about your work!

LEROY Yes, ma'am.

[He goes out]

MONICA He has the mind of an 8-year-old, but he's managed to produce a family so I keep him on.
[The doorbell rings]
It's probably Miss Fern.

CHRISTINE *[Going to door]* Yes. Come in, Miss Fern. We're nearly ready, I think.

MISS FERN I'm a bit ahead of time, as usual.

[She comes in primly. As the head of the most aristocratic school in the state she has achieved a certain savoir faire, though she is in herself a timid and undistinguished little old maid, making the most of the remains of once quite remarkable beauty]

MONICA Oh, Miss Fern, the old scatterbrain left her two dozen cupcakes upstairs. Rhoda, will you help me carry them down?

RHODA Yes, of course I will,

MONICA They're all packed.

RHODA [*She curtsies to Miss Fern*] Morning, Miss Fern.

MISS FERN That's a perfect curtsy, Rhoda.

RHODA Thank you, Miss Fern.

[*She goes out the front door with MONICA*]

CHRISTINE She does such things well?

MISS FERN She does everything well. As you must know better than I.

CHRISTINE And, as a person, does she fit in well—at the school?

MISS FERN Let me think—in what way, Mrs. Penmark?

CHRISTINE Well, Rhoda has been—I don't quite know how to say it. There's a mature quality about her that's disturbing in a child. My husband and I thought that a school like yours, where you believe in discipline and the old-fashioned virtues, might perhaps teach her to be a bit more of a child.

MISS FERN Yes—yes, I know what you mean. In some ways, in many ways, Rhoda is the most satisfactory pupil the school has ever had. She's never been absent. She's never been tardy. She's the only child in the history of the school who has made a hundred in deportment each month in every class, and a hundred in self-reliance and conservation on the playground each month for a full school year. If you had dealt with as many children as I have, you'd realize what a remarkable record that is. And she's the neatest little girl I've ever encountered.

CHRISTINE Kenneth says he doesn't know where she gets her tidiness. Certainly not from him or me.

MISS FERN She has many good qualities. She's certainly no tattletale.

CHRISTINE Oh?

MISS FERN One of our children broke a window across the street and we knew that Rhoda knew who it was. When we questioned her about it, and told her it was her duty as an honorable citizen to report the offender, she just went on eating her apple, shaking her head, denying that she knew anything about it—and looking us over with that pitying, calculating look she has at certain times.

CHRISTINE Oh, I know that look so well!

MISS FERN But that was admirable too, for she was merely being loyal to a playmate.

CHRISTINE Then—do the other children like her? Is she popular?

MISS FERN The other children? Well, I . . .

[MISS FERN *hesitates, trying to think of something to say, and is saved from having to answer by the re-entry of MONICA and RHODA, carrying two small packed baskets*]

MONICA Here we are!

MISS FERN Then I suppose we should go, for my sisters and the others will be waiting. Goodbye, Mrs. Penmark.

CHRISTINE Goodbye! May it be everything a picnic should be!

MISS FERN Thank you! Come, Rhoda!

[*She takes one of the baskets and goes to the door*]

RHODA Yes, Miss Fern.

[*She goes to be kissed by her mother*]

MONICA Calm sea and prosperous voyage!

MISS FERN Thank you! We'll take care of her!

[RHODA runs to Monica for a last quick hug]
No time! We're off!

MONICA We stole time, didn't we, Rhoda?

MISS FERN Bless you both!

[*She goes out with RHODA*]

MONICA So now the older set's left behind with nothing to do.

CHRISTINE I could go through the dreary business of trying to make my face presentable. It happens every morning.

MONICA Your face! Think of mine!

CHRISTINE It always makes me gloomy when Kenneth goes away. Anything could happen—before I see him again. There's an old saying—we die a little at parting.

MONICA Oh my dear. We die a little every day if you want to brood about it! Why don't we make some kind of party of this? You're having Emory and Reginald Tasker to lunch—can't I help with that?

CHRISTINE What does one feed a criminologist?

MONICA Oh, prussic acid, blue vitriol, ground glass—

CHRISTINE Hot weather things!

MONICA Nothing would hurt Reggie. He thrives on buckets of blood and sudden death.

CHRISTINE How many mysteries has he written?

MONICA A complete set of his works would encircle the Empire State building—or me. Come on—I'm a garrulous old hag, but I can grind glass. We're not going to let you be lonely.

[*They go into the kitchen together. LEROY comes in with pail and brush, and opens one of the windows, muttering to himself*]

LEROY

That know-it-all, that Monica Breedlove, she don't think nobody knows anything but her. I'll show that bitch plenty. And that young trough-fed Mrs. Penmark. She don't get enough of what she needs, and I could give it to her. Now Rhoda's smart. That's a smart little girl. She's almost as smart as I am. She sees through me and I see through her. By damn she's smart.

CURTAIN

Act One

SCENE 2

It is 2:30 p.m. the same day. Christine has served lunch in her apartment to Emory Wages and his sister Monica, also to Reginald Tasker, a friend of theirs who writes detective stories and has made himself a minor expert in the history of crime. The luncheon dishes have mostly been removed, and the guests still linger over their iced drinks. The men have taken off their coats. Tasker and Emory are laughing as the curtain goes up.

MONICA But I did meet him! Nobody ever believes that I met Sigmund Freud—

EMORY Now, come—they believe you—

MONICA You mean it's automatic flattery. They know I'm old enough, but they voice doubts to make me feel better—Well, perhaps. Anyway, it wasn't Dr. Freud who analyzed me; it was Dr. Kettlebaum in London.

EMORY Now we're off.

MONICA And this was my choice, too. Not that I minimize Freud's professional standing, for I still consider him the great genius of our time—but Dr. Kettlebaum was more—more *sympatico*, if you know what I mean, Reggie.

EMORY It means *sympatico*, if you know what that means.

MONICA Freud loathed American women—

CHRISTINE Oh?

MONICA Especially those that talked back to him, and I loathed his Germanic prejudice against feminine independence, which he couldn't conceal.

CHRISTINE Was Freud prejudiced?

MONICA Indeed he was. Not consciously, you know. He just bristled when I suggested that women had more sense than men. Now Dr. Kettlebaum believed in the power of the individual soul, and considered sex of only trivial interest. His mind was less literal, more mystic, like my own.

CHRISTINE Oh, Monica! Did the analysis do you any good, really?

MONICA Well, it broke up my marriage. I looked into the very bottom of my soul. What a spectacle! When I came back I asked Mr. Breedlove for a divorce and he didn't oppose it. Then I decided that what I'd always really wanted was to make a home for my brother—and so I did. I don't think dear Emory appreciates it, but what woman—

EMORY I can stand anything except talk about your analysis—and analyzing of your friends—and me. I don't want to look at the bottom of my soul.

MONICA I can understand that perfectly. We're all so sensitive about these things. The truth absolutely disgusts us. Now I've come to the conclusion that Emory is a "larvated homosexual"—

CHRISTINE What?

EMORY Thank you! What does larvated mean?

MONICA It means covered as with a masque—concealed.

TASKER It means something that hasn't come to the surface—
as yet.

EMORY You can say that again. If I'm a homosexual, they'll
have to change the whole concept of what goes on
among 'em.

TASKER Where do you get that idea, Monica?

MONICA Pure association, the best evidence of all. Emory's fifty-
two years old, and he's never married. I doubt if he's
ever had a serious love affair.

EMORY How would you know if they're serious?

MONICA Please, let's look at things objectively. What are Emory's
deepest interests in life? They are—
[*She counts them on her fingers*]
fishing, murder mysteries in which housewives are dis-
membered, canasta, baseball games, and singing in male
quartets. How does Emory spend Sundays? He spends
them on a boat with Reggie and other men—fishing.
And are there ladies present on these occasions? There
are not.

EMORY You're damned right there are not!

MONICA I guess you are all shocked, aren't you? But you
shouldn't be. Actually, homosexuality is triter than
incest. Dr. Kettlebaum considered it was all a matter
of personal preference. I'm perfectly frank about my-
self. Subconsciously I have an incestuous fixation on
Emory. It's not normal, but that's the way it is.

EMORY Thanks a million, little sister. Can't we talk about
something normal, like murder? Anybody mind if I
smoke a cigar?

MONICA What are you trying to prove, Emory?

CHRISTINE Let's relax away from the table and have our tea over
here.

- MONICA Yes, we've run thru sex, let's try homicide. Reggie, you're the expert.
- EMORY Any change is for the better.
- TASKER All right, I'll oblige. I've been collecting data on Mrs. Allison lately. *News Budget* wants an article on her, but I can't say she's a very flaming subject. Just an unimaginative nurse who decided she was in a position to kill folks off for their insurance—and ran through quite a list before anybody suspected her.
- EMORY Was this recent?
- TASKER Well, last year and the year before. She'd be going still only she was too stupid to vary her poisons, with the result that all her victims had similar symptoms—nausea, burning throat, intestinal pain and convulsions—to say nothing of the conventional life insurance policies made out to the old girl with the arsenic.
- CHRISTINE Please, I don't like to hear about such things.
- MONICA You don't?
- CHRISTINE No.
- MONICA Now that's an interesting psychic block. Why would Christine dislike hearing about murders?
- CHRISTINE I don't know—I have an aversion to violence of any kind. I even hate the revolver Kenneth keeps in the house.
- MONICA Oh, do you dislike the revolver more than the poisons?
- CHRISTINE I hate them both.
- MONICA Hmm, perhaps if you'll try saying the first thing that comes into your mind we can get at the root anxiety. Say it, no matter how silly it seems to you! Tell your story, Reggie, and Christine will associate.

EMORY Oh, nonsense, Monica.

CHRISTINE What do you mean by "associate?"

MONICA Just speak up—because any idea that comes into your mind will be an associated idea.

CHRISTINE Oh.

TASKER Well, the end of the story was like this. Toward the middle of May, last year, Mrs. Allison visited her sister-in-law's family. She got there in time for lunch, and her niece Shirley reminded her that she had promised to bring a present for her birthday. Mrs. Allison was so upset about forgetting the present that she went to the neighborhood store and bought candy and soft drinks for the family.

MONICA [*Nudging Christine*] Do you think of anything?

CHRISTINE Oh, absolutely nothing.

TASKER Actually Mrs. Allison *had* brought her niece a present. It was ten cents' worth of arsenic.

MONICA But there must be something in your mind—something!

CHRISTINE Well, I was thinking at the moment of how devoted the Fern sisters were to my father, when he was a radio commentator.

MONICA Hmm—I don't think I understand that—so far. How did you know of this?

CHRISTINE Oh, they spoke of it when I entered Rhoda in their school.

EMORY Isn't your father Richard Bravo?

CHRISTINE Yes.

EMORY Yes, I thought so. Well, the whole nation was devoted to him during the last war.

- TASKER Yes, listened to Bravo every evening.
- MONICA Is there any more of the story?
- TASKER Yes. When Mrs. Allison returned from the store she opened a bottle of sarsaparilla for her niece, and then watched the little girl's convulsions for an hour—
- MONICA Now—without thinking at all—what's your second association?
[CHRISTINE *hesitates*]
No editing—no skipping—
- CHRISTINE Well, what I was thinking was even sillier. I've always had a feeling that I was an adopted child, and that the Bravos weren't my real parents.
- MONICA Oh, you poor innocent darling! Don't you know that the changeling fantasy is one of the commonest of childhood? I once believed I was a foundling with royal blood—Plantagenet, I think it was. Emory was a Tudor. But have you really always had this—suspicion—that you were adopted?
- CHRISTINE Yes, always.
- MONICA But no evidence?
- CHRISTINE Only that I dream about it.
- MONICA What kind of dream?
- CHRISTINE Oh, Monica, must I tell my dreams too? I'd rather hear the murder story.
- MONICA Well let's hear more story, then hear more from Christine.
- EMORY Why do you always want to dig at people's insides? Monica, you're a ghoul.
- MONICA Of course, who isn't? Furnish the final details, Reggie.

TASKER Well, Mrs. Allison hurried back to town on an urgent errand. She hadn't paid the current premium on the policy on Shirley's life, and this was the last day of grace.

EMORY Stupid!

TASKER Allison was certainly crude. But there have been artists in her line, really gifted operators like Bessie Denker. Bessie never made a mistake, never left a trace, never committed an imperfect crime—

CHRISTINE [*Suddenly interested*] Who was this?

TASKER The most amazing woman in all the annals of homicide, Bessie Denker. She was beautiful, she was brainy and she was ruthless. She never used the same poison twice. Her own father, for example, died of rabies, contracted supposedly from a mad dog. It just happened that all his money went to Bessie—

CHRISTINE Did you say Bessie Denker?

TASKER Yes.

CHRISTINE Excuse me. I, I think—I—

EMORY I guess Christine has had enough of this, Reggie. Couldn't we talk about something else?

TASKER We certainly could.

MONICA And we will—though I'm still puzzled—

CHRISTINE No, no—tell us more about Dr. Kettlebaum—

EMORY If you leave it to Monica, she has three subjects: sex, psychiatry and pills. Sex and psychiatry are synonymous. Better try pills.

MONICA By pills Emory means the modern pharmaceutical discoveries which have revolutionized medicine since 1935. If you took them, Emory, you'd be a better man.

- TASKER [*Looking at his watch*] I should have looked at this before. I've got a lecture date at three-thirty, and I won't be much ahead of time if I start now. Will you forgive me for filling the air with horror stories, Mrs. Penmark?
- CHRISTINE Oh, you must forgive me, Mr. Tasker! I have some kind of phobia or mania so that I'm quite unreasonable when I hear such things.
- TASKER I'm sick of the bloody stuff myself and only keep on with it to make a living—so let's be friends.
- [*He puts out a hand. CHRISTINE shakes with him*]
- CHRISTINE Yes, of course.
- TASKER I do have to go. Goodbye, Monica.
- MONICA Goodbye, Bluebeard.
- EMORY Goodbye, Reggie. See you Sunday. I hear the red-fish are running.
- [TASKER *goes out*]
- TASKER [*From outside*] Good.
- EMORY I wonder if it wouldn't be about time for the news.
 [*He goes to the radio*]
 Do you mind, Christine?
- CHRISTINE Of course not. I'll just clear these off.
- MONICA I'll lend a hand.
- [*The women carry plates into the kitchen. EMORY finds the local news broadcast*]
- THE RADIO "Nothing more important has happened for many years in the field of foreign affairs."
 [*There is a brief pause, then the voice proceeds on a somewhat different note*]

"I interrupt this broadcast to—I have been asked to announce that one of the children on the annual outing of the Fern Grammar School was accidentally drowned in the bay this afternoon. The name of the victim is being withheld until the parents are first notified. More news of the tragic affair is expected momentarily. This is Station WWB—in Tallahassee, bringing you the 3:15 news, brought to you by PICKETS HARDWARE, Best For Your Home Needs."

[MONICA and CHRISTINE hurry into the room, listening. MONICA puts her arm around Christine. EMORY turns the voice down]

MONICA It was not Rhoda. Rhoda is too self-reliant a child. It was some timid, confused youngster, afraid of its own shadow. It certainly wasn't Rhoda.

[EMORY turns the voice up]

THE RADIO "To return to local affairs, I am now authorized to give the name of the victim of the drowning at the Fern School picnic. It was Claude Daigle, the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Dwight Daigle of 126 Willow Street. He appears to have fallen into the water from an abandoned wharf on the Fern property. It is a mystery how the little boy got on the wharf, for all the children had been forbidden to play near or on it, but his body was found off the end of the landing, wedged among the pilings. The guards who brought up the body applied artificial respiration without result. There were bruises on the forehead and hands, but it is assumed these were caused by the body washing against the pilings. And now back to the national news."

[EMORY turns the radio off]

CHRISTINE Poor child—poor little boy!

MONICA They'll send the children home immediately. They must be on their way now.

EMORY This will be the end of the picnic.

- CHRISTINE I don't know what to say to her. Rhoda is eight. I remember I didn't know about death—or it didn't touch me closely—till I was much older. A teacher I adored died. My whole world changed and darkened.
- MONICA We'd better go. This is no time for well-meaning friends to look on from the sidelines.
- CHRISTINE I don't know what to say to her.
- EMORY You'll meet it better alone. Honestly you will.
- MONICA Yes, you will, dear. We'll go. It's between you and Rhoda, dear. Nobody else can help.
- CHRISTINE Yes, I suppose so.
- EMORY Children get these shocks all the time. Life's a grim business.
- CHRISTINE I'm glad you were here. She'll have missed lunch, so I'll make her a sandwich.
- MONICA We'll be upstairs in case you need us.
- CHRISTINE Thank you, Monica. Thank you both.
[MONICA and EMORY go out. The clock strikes once—three-thirty. CHRISTINE carries some dishes from the table to the kitchen, leaving the table practically clear. The door opens while she is in the kitchen and RHODA comes in, quiet and unruffled. She sits and removes her shoes. CHRISTINE re-enters from the kitchen]
Darling!
- RHODA Mother, you know we didn't really have our lunch because Claude Daigle was drowned.
- CHRISTINE I know. It was on the radio.
- RHODA He was drowned, so then they were all rushing and calling and hurrying to see if they could make him alive

again, but they couldn't, so then they said the picnic was over and we had to go home.

CHRISTINE I'm glad you're home!

RHODA So could I have a peanut-butter sandwich and milk?

[CHRISTINE puts her arm around her]

CHRISTINE Did you see him, dear?

RHODA Yes, of course. Then they put a blanket over him.

CHRISTINE Did you see him taken from the water?

RHODA Yes, they laid him out on the lawn and worked and worked. But it didn't help.

CHRISTINE You must try to get these pictures out of your mind. I don't want you to be frightened or bothered at all. These things happen and we must accept them.

RHODA I thought it was exciting. Could I have the peanut-butter sandwich?

CHRISTINE [Taking away her arm, rising] Yes, I'm getting it ready for you.

[She goes into the kitchen. RHODA puts her shoes in the cupboard and takes out skates. CHRISTINE enters with a glass of milk and a sandwich as Rhoda sits]

Here, dear. Darling, you're controlling yourself very well, but just the same it was an unfortunate thing to see and remember. I understand how you feel, my darling.

RHODA I don't know what you're talking about. I don't feel any way at all.

[She tastes the milk]

[CHRISTINE is puzzled. RHODA, feeling that she has displeased her mother somehow, grabs Christine's hand and rubs it against her cheek]

CHRISTINE Have you been naughty?

RHODA Why, no, mother. What will you give me if I give you a basket of kisses?

CHRISTINE [*Feeling a great rush of affection*] I'll give you a basket of hugs!

RHODA I want to go out and skate on the asphalt.

CHRISTINE Then you should, dear.

[CHRISTINE goes to the kitchen to do the dishes. RHODA puts the skates on. LEROY opens the door and comes in to empty waste baskets]

LEROY [*Under his breath*] How come you go skating and enjoying yourself when your poor little schoolmate is still damp from drowning in the bay? Looks to me like you'd be in the house crying your eyes out; either that or be in church burning a candle in a blue cup.

[RHODA stares at Leroy but gives no answer. Then with her sandwich in her hand, she gets up and walks on her skates to the door]

RHODA 'Bye, mother!

CHRISTINE [*From the kitchen*] Goodbye, Rhoda.

LEROY Ask me, and I'll say you don't even feel sorry for what happened to that little boy.

RHODA Why should I feel sorry? It was Claude Daigle got drowned, not me.

[*She goes out. LEROY shakes his head*]

CURTAIN

Act One

SCENE 3

It is evening of the same day and Rhoda, ready for bed, is lying on the couch while her mother reads to her. A pillow from her bedroom is under her head, and a half-empty glass sits on the coffee-table beside her.

CHRISTINE *[Reading]* "Then the knight alit from his steed and sought what way he could find out of this labyrinth, and a path appearing he began to make his way along it and it began at that time to grow dark. The knight had not gone more than a dozen paces before he saw beside the path a beautiful lady who laid out a fair damask cloth under an oak and set thereon cates and dainties and a flagon with two silver cups."

[She pauses]

RHODA Mother?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA Why aren't you reading?

CHRISTINE I was just thinking.

RHODA What about? The accident?

CHRISTINE Partly—and about my phone call. The circuits were busy.

RHODA What are cates and dainties?

CHRISTINE Little cakes, I think.

RHODA Oh.

CHRISTINE [*Reading*] . . . “and set thereon cates and dainties and a flagon with two silver cups. ‘Knight,’ she called, ‘knight, come eat and drink with me, for you are hungry and thirsty and I am alone.’” Did you take your vitamins, dear?

RHODA [*Sitting up, taking a capsule, sipping from the glass*]
I took one before. This is the second. I was saving them because I like the juice.
[*She lies back*]
This is wonderful, to have you read to me out here.

CHRISTINE You’d better take the third one now.—You’ll be too sleepy.

RHODA All right.
[*She sits up and takes another capsule and the last of the drink, then lies back*]
I’ll close my eyes, but I won’t be asleep.

CHRISTINE I know.
[*She reads*]
“Then the knight answered her, ‘I thank you, fair lady, for I am not only hungry and thirsty but I am lost within the forest.’ Then he let his palfrey graze near-by and he feasted with the lady, who gave him loving looks, sweeter than the wine from the flagon, though the wine was sweet and strong, and in this fashion the time passed till the light was gone out of the wood and it was dark.”
[*She pauses*]
“The knight heard the music of hautbois softly playing and he perceived that a fair pavilion stood near-by under the oak trees, lighted by a torch at the entrance where there were servants going to and fro. And he was aware that the pavilion had not been there in the

daylight, but had been created out of darkness—by magic—”

Rhoda? Rhoda?

[There's no answer. CHRISTINE rises, takes the empty glass to the kitchen, returns and bends over Rhoda to pick her up. The phone rings. CHRISTINE goes quickly to answer it, so that it won't wake the child. She picks up the receiver]

Yes, I was calling Washington, D. C. Yes, Bethesda 1293. Mr. Richard Bravo. That's right. Daddy, I'm so glad I found you at home! I've been trying to get you all evening. You said in your letter you might be coming to Tallahassee? Are you well enough to be doing such things? Well that's not really far from here—Couldn't you come to see me? Daddy, couldn't you make it sooner? Could you . . . Well as soon as you can?—No, we're well. It's not that. You met Kenneth at the airport? Tell him I'm writing my first letter to him tonight. I'll send it Air Mail Special in the morning.—Tell him I love him and miss him. And remember I love you and miss you.—No, nothing like that. Daddy, do you remember that recurrent dream I used to have when I was a child?—Now, I'm beginning to have it again and again.—I know what the Freudians say,—but even they tell you dreams can't come out of any past but your own!—Tell me, daddy, is there some terrible thing in my past that I don't know? No—nobody. It's something I dream. Yes, I'll be good. And I will see you? You always help! You always have! I do feel better. Already. Good night, daddy.

[She hangs up. Rhoda still sleeps. CHRISTINE goes to the couch, watches her a moment, then picks her up and carries her to her room.]

CURTAIN

Act One

SCENE 4

Mid-morning, a few days later, in the same apartment. The living-room is empty; Rhoda can be heard practicing "Au Clair de la Lune" on the piano in the den. Christine is in the kitchen. The doorbell chimes and she answers it. Miss Fern is at the door.

MISS FERN May I come in, Mrs. Penmark?

CHRISTINE Yes, of course, Miss Fern. I meant to come and see you. I got your note.

MISS FERN [*Entering*] We're in such distress, all of us at the school, and we've suffered such a blow, losing one of the children that way, I'm sure you'll excuse us for going over and over things!

CHRISTINE I think everybody has been puzzled and worried and saddened.

MISS FERN I don't think I've ever known any happening to puzzle so many people in so many ways. And I can help so few of them. I've just come from seeing Mrs. Daigle. Of course, our first thought was of her. The rest of us are touched only lightly by this tragedy. She will have to live with it the rest of her days.

CHRISTINE I know.

MISS FERN I have seen her several times, and each time she has

asked me to find out from you if you had any possible clue to where the penmanship medal might be.

CHRISTINE It was lost?

MISS FERN Yes, it wasn't found with the body and has completely disappeared.

CHRISTINE I didn't know of this.

[At this moment RHODA comes out with a book in her hand, dressed immaculately as usual]

RHODA *[Curtsying]* Good morning, Miss Fern.

MISS FERN Good morning, Rhoda.

RHODA Mother, could I sit under the scuppernong arbor for a while and read my book?

CHRISTINE Of course, Rhoda.

RHODA It's shady there, and I can see your window, and you can watch me from the window, and I like to be where you can see me.

CHRISTINE Is it a new book?

RHODA Yes. It's *Elsie Dinsmore*. The one I got for a prize at Sunday school.

CHRISTINE I'll be here.

RHODA I'll be right there all the time. Goodbye, Miss Fern.

[Curtsy. She runs out]

MISS FERN It did occur to me that—that Rhoda might have told you a detail or two which she hadn't remembered when she talked with me. You see, she was the last to see the little Daigle boy alive—

CHRISTINE Are you sure of that?

MISS FERN Yes.

CHRISTINE I hadn't realized—

MISS FERN About an hour after we arrived at the estate one of our older pupils came on Rhoda and the Daigle boy at the far end of the grounds. The boy was upset and crying, and Rhoda was standing in front of him, blocking his path. The older girl was among the trees, and neither child saw her. She was just about to intervene when Rhoda shoved the boy and snatched at his medal, but he broke away and ran down the beach in the direction of the old wharf where he was later found. Rhoda followed him, not running, just walking along, taking her time, the older girl said.

CHRISTINE Has it occurred to you that the older girl might not be telling the truth?

MISS FERN That isn't at all likely. She was one of the monitors we'd appointed to keep an eye on the younger children. She's fifteen and has been with us since kindergarten days. No, Mrs. Penmark, she was telling precisely what she saw. We know her well.

CHRISTINE And that was the last time Claude was seen?

MISS FERN Yes. A little later—it might have been about noon—one of the guards saw Rhoda coming off the wharf. He shouted a warning, but by then she was on the beach again and he decided to forget the matter. The guard didn't identify the girl by name, but she was wearing a red dress, he said, and Rhoda was the only girl who wore a dress that day. At one o'clock the lunch bell rang and Claude was missing when the roll was called. You know the rest, I think.

CHRISTINE Yes. But this is very serious—that Rhoda was on the wharf—

MISS FERN Not serious, really, when you've seen as much of how children behave as I have. Children conceal things from

adults. Suppose Rhoda did follow the Daigle child onto the wharf—so many things could have happened quite innocently. He may have hidden himself in the old boat-house, and then, when discovered, may have backed away from Rhoda and fallen in the water.

CHRISTINE Yes, that could have happened.

MISS FERN Now, Claude, although he looked frail, was an excellent swimmer—and, of course, Rhoda knew that. Once he was in the water she would have expected him to swim ashore. How could she know that the treacherous pilings were at the exact spot where he fell?

CHRISTINE No.

MISS FERN Perhaps the thought in Rhoda's mind when he fell in the water was that he'd ruin his new suit and she'd get a scolding for causing it. When he didn't swim ashore at once she may have thought, with the logic of childhood, that he'd hidden under the wharf to frighten her—or to escape her. Later on, when it was too late to do anything, she was afraid to admit what had happened.

CHRISTINE Then you think she does know something she hasn't told?

MISS FERN Yes. I think that, like many a frightened soldier, she deserted under fire. This is not a serious charge. Few of us are courageous when tested.

CHRISTINE She has lied, though.

MISS FERN Is there any adult who hasn't lied? Smooth the lines from your brow, my dear. You're so much prettier when smiling.

CHRISTINE I shall question Rhoda.

MISS FERN I wish you would, though I doubt that you'll learn more than you know.

CHRISTINE And there's something I want to ask you. There was a floral tribute at Claude's funeral sent by the children of the Fern School. I suppose the children shared the expense—but I haven't been asked to pay my part of it.

MISS FERN The tribute wasn't nearly so expensive as the papers seemed to think. The money has been collected, and the flowers paid for.

CHRISTINE Perhaps you telephoned me, and I was out.

MISS FERN No, my dear. We thought perhaps you'd want to send flowers individually.

CHRISTINE But why should we have sent flowers individually? Rhoda wasn't friendly with the boy, and my husband and I had never met the Daigles.

MISS FERN I don't know, my dear. I really—there are three of us, you know, and in the hurry of making decisions—

[She pauses]

CHRISTINE You make excuses for Rhoda—and then you admit that you didn't ask me to help pay for the flowers—and the reasons you give for not asking me are obviously specious. Does this mean that in your mind, and the minds of your sisters, there is some connection between the drowning and Rhoda's presence on the wharf?

MISS FERN I refuse to believe there is any connection.

CHRISTINE And yet you have acted as if there were.

MISS FERN Yes, perhaps we have.

CHRISTINE This is a terrible tragedy for Mrs. Daigle, as you say. She has lost her only son. But if there were any shadow over Rhoda—from what has happened—I shall have to live under it, too—and my husband. As for Rhoda—she would not be happy in your school next year.

MISS FERN No, she would not. And since she would not, it would be as well to make up our minds now that she will not be there.

CHRISTINE Then there is a shadow over her—and you have decided that she will not be invited to return to the Fern School?

MISS FERN Yes. We have made that decision.

CHRISTINE But you can't tell me why?

MISS FERN I think her behavior in the matter of the medal would be sufficient explanation. She has no sense of fair play. She's a poor loser. She doesn't play the game.

CHRISTINE But you're not saying that Rhoda had anything to do with Claude's death?

MISS FERN Of course not! Such a possibility never entered our minds!

[At this moment the doorbell chimes]

CHRISTINE I'd better answer.

MISS FERN Of course, my dear.

[CHRISTINE goes to the door, hesitates a moment, and then opens it. MR. and MRS. DAIGLE come in, he tentatively, she boldly. She has been drinking]

CHRISTINE Yes?

MRS. DAIGLE Thanks. We're Mrs. Daigle and Mr. Daigle. You didn't have to let us in, you know. *[To Miss Fern]* You realize we followed you. We shouldn't have done it. I'm a little drunk. *[To Christine]* I guess you never get a little drunk.

CHRISTINE You're quite welcome, both of you.

MRS. DAIGLE Oh, pay no attention to him. He's all for good-breeding.

He was trying to stop me. Now, you, Mrs. Penmark. You've always had plenty. You're a superior person.

CHRISTINE No, I'm not.

MRS. DAIGLE Oh, yes. Father was rich. Rich Richard Bravo. I know. Never had to touch dinner. Now I worked in a beauty parlor. Miss Fern used to come there. She looks down on me.

MISS FERN Please, Mrs. Daigle.

MRS. DAIGLE I was that frumpy blonde. Now I've lost my boy and I'm a lush. Everybody knows it.

MR. DAIGLE We're worried about Mrs. Daigle. She's under a doctor's care. She's not herself.

MRS. DAIGLE But I know what I'm about just the same. Just the same. May I call you Christine? I'm quite aware that you come from a higher level of society. You prolly made a debut and all that. I always considered Christine such a gentle name. Hortense sounds fat—that's me, Hortense. "My girl Hortense," that's what they used to sing at me, "Hasn't got much sense. Let's write her name on the privy fence." Children can be nasty, don't you think?

MR. DAIGLE Please, Hortense.

MRS. DAIGLE You're so attractive, Christine. You have such exquisite taste in clothes, but of course you have amples of money to buy 'em with. What I came to see you about, I asked Miss Fern how did Claude happen to lose the medal, and she wouldn't tell me a thing.

MISS FERN I don't know, Mrs. Daigle. Truly.

MRS. DAIGLE You know more than you're telling. You're a sly one—because of the school. You don't want the school to get a bad name. But you know more than you're telling, Miss Butter-Wouldn't-Melt Fern. There's something

funny about the whole thing. I've said so over and over to Mr. Daigle. He married quite late, you know. In his forties. But I wasn't exactly what the fellow calls a "spring chicken" either. We won't have any more children. No more.

MR. DAIGLE Please, Hortense. Let me take you home where you can rest.

MRS. DAIGLE Rest. Sleep. When you can't sleep at night, you can't sleep in the daylight. I lie and look at the water where he went down. There's something funny about the whole thing, Christine. I heard that your little girl was the last who saw him alive. Will you ask her about the last few minutes and tell me what she says? Maybe she remembers some little thing. I don't care how small it is! No matter how small! You know something, Miss Fern dyes her hair! She knows something and she won't tell me. Oh, my poor little Claude! What did they do to you?

[CHRISTINE goes to Mrs. Daigle and puts her arm around her]

CHRISTINE I will ask Rhoda. Hortense. Oh, if I only knew!

MRS. DAIGLE Somebody took the medal off his shirt, Christine. It couldn't come off by accident. I pinned it on myself, and it has a clasp that locks in place. It was no accident. You can wear such simple things, can't you? I never could wear simple things. I couldn't even buy 'em. When I got 'em home they didn't look simple.—He was such a lovely, dear little boy. He said I was his sweetheart. He said he was going to marry me when he grew up. I used to laugh and say, "You'll forget me long before then. You'll find a prettier girl, and you'll marry her." And you know what he said then? He said, "No, I won't, because there's not a prettier girl in the whole world than you are." If you don't believe me, ask the girl who comes in and cleans. She was present at the time.

MR. DAIGLE Hortense—Hortense!

MRS. DAIGLE Why do you put your arms around me? You don't give a damn about me. You're a superior person and all that, and I'm—oh, God forgive me! There were those bruises on his hands, and that peculiar crescent-shaped mark on his forehead that the undertaker covered up. He must have bled before he died. That's what the doctor said. And where's the medal? Who took the medal? I have a right to know what became of the penmanship medal! If I knew, I'd have a good idea what happened to him.—I don't know why you took it on yourself to put your arms around me. I'm as good as you are. And Claude was better than your girl. He won the medal, and she didn't.—I'm drunk. It's a pleasure to stay drunk when your little boy's been killed. Maybe I'd better lay down.

MR. DAIGLE We'll go home, and you can lie down there.

MRS. DAIGLE Why not? Why not go home, and lay down? Goodbye, all.

MR. DAIGLE I'm sorry.

MRS. DAIGLE Oh, who cares what they think? I drank a half bottle of bonded corn in little sips. I'm drunk as holy hell.

[The DAIGLES go out]

CHRISTINE Oh, the poor woman!

MISS FERN I've tried to think of any little thing I could to tell her. But nothing helps.

CHRISTINE Nothing will ever help.

MISS FERN No.—I'll be getting back. Thank you for bearing with her, and with me.

CHRISTINE I'll try again with Rhoda. There's no help for this poor creature,
[She indicates the door]
but I'll try.

MISS FERN We both have to do what we can. Goodbye, Mrs. Penmark.

CHRISTINE Goodbye, Miss Fern.
[She suddenly goes to Miss Fern as she is about to turn in the doorway, and kisses her, her eyes filling with tears]
 She will have to live with it till she dies.

MISS FERN Yes. Till she dies. Thank you.
[She goes, closing the door. CHRISTINE turns and looks at the apartment, then goes to the window from which she can see Rhoda. After a moment she waves, and we know that Rhoda has looked up from her book. The telephone rings, and CHRISTINE answers]

CHRISTINE Yes, yes, speaking.—Oh Kenneth, I'm so glad you called. She's well and I'm well. The little boy who was drowned? Oh, no, Rhoda's her usual self. She's across the street where I can look out and see her reading a book. Do you really, darling?—I hope it won't be too much longer. Four weeks is a long, long time. Call me as often as you can, darling. I love you. Then don't be late. Goodbye, dear.

[She hangs up and MONICA opens the door]

CHRISTINE Oh, Monica.

MONICA Yes, Christine, the fluttery one with the typically inane conversation, but I do have an errand this time, not just gab—

CHRISTINE Come in, please.

MONICA *[Entering]* It's Rhoda's locket I'm using for an excuse. I've actually found a place where they'll engrave and clean it in one day. They didn't agree to this unusual effort without a little pressure—in fact, I had to threaten—

CHRISTINE Not really?

MONICA Oh, you don't know the old busy-body. She uses pressure, influence, bribery, blackmail—and I had to pull them all on old Mr. Pageson. He said this little job would take at least two weeks—

CHRISTINE I'll get the locket. I know where she keeps it.

MONICA Good. I told him straight that I'm handling the Community Chest again this year, and if he were as busy as all that, I'd be happy to revise my estimate of his contribution upward by a considerable amount.

[CHRISTINE has opened Rhoda's table drawer and found the locket in the chocolate box. Her fingers feel something under the oilcloth lining of the drawer and she extracts it also, concealing it from Monica, but turning toward her with the locket]

Ah, you found it! The darling! She keeps her treasures so carefully it's a kind of miserly delight.

CHRISTINE Shall I wrap it?

MONICA No, no! I'll just drop it in my purse.

[She does so]

And now I'll take to the air, dear Christine—only do forgive me bursting in and rushing out!

CHRISTINE No ceremony, please.

MONICA No ceremony, no; just plain pragmatism! Goodbye, darling.

CHRISTINE Goodbye, Monica.

[MONICA goes out. CHRISTINE regards the medal in her hand with a kind of horror mixed with incredulity. After a moment she goes to the window from which Rhoda was seen. Evidently Rhoda is not there. She turns from the window and sits on the couch, staring at the medal. The door opens and RHODA comes in quietly]

RHODA Did you want me to come in, mother? When you waved?

CHRISTINE So you had the medal, after all. Claude Daigle's medal.

[She puts it on coffee table]

RHODA *[Warily]* Where did you find it?

CHRISTINE How did the penmanship medal happen to be hidden under the lining of the drawer of your table? Tell me the truth, Rhoda.

[RHODA takes off one of her shoes and examines it. Then, smiling a little in a fashion she has always found charming, she asks—]

RHODA When we move into our new house can we have a scuppernong arbor, mother? Can we, mother? It's so shady, and pretty, and I love sitting in it!

CHRISTINE Answer my question. And remember I'm not as innocent about what went on at the picnic as you think. Miss Fern has told me a great deal. So please don't bother to make up a story for my benefit.

[RHODA is silent, her mind working]

How did Claude Daigle's medal get in your drawer? It certainly didn't get there by itself.

[RHODA is silent]

I'm waiting for your answer.

RHODA I don't know how the medal got there, mother. How could I?

CHRISTINE *[Controlling herself]* You know. You know quite well how it got there. Did you go on the wharf at any time during the picnic? At any time?

RHODA *[After a pause]* Yes, mother. I—I went there once.

CHRISTINE Was it before or after you were bothering Claude?

RHODA I didn't bother Claude, mother. What makes you think that?

- CHRISTINE Why did you go on the wharf?
- RHODA It was real early. When we first got there.
- CHRISTINE You knew it was forbidden. Why did you do it?
- RHODA One of the big boys said there were little oysters that grew on the pilings. I wanted to see if they did.
- CHRISTINE One of the guards saw you coming off the wharf. But he says it was just before lunch time.
- RHODA I don't know why he says that. He's wrong, and I told Miss Fern he was wrong. He hollered at me to come off the wharf and I did. I went back to the lawn and that's where I saw Claude. But I wasn't bothering him.
- CHRISTINE What did you say to Claude?
- RHODA I said if I didn't win the medal, I was glad he did.
- CHRISTINE [*Wearily*] Please, please, Rhoda. I know you're an adroit liar. But I must have the truth.
- RHODA But it's all true, mother. Every word.
- CHRISTINE One of the monitors saw you try to snatch the medal off Claude's shirt. Is that true? Every word?
- RHODA Oh, that big girl was Mary Beth Musgrove. She told everybody she saw me. Even Leroy knows she saw me. [*She opens her eyes wide, and smiles as though resolving on complete candor*]
You see, Claude and I were playing a game we made up. He said if I could catch him in ten minutes and touch the medal with my hand—it was like prisoner's base—he'd let me wear the medal for an hour. How can Mary Beth say I took the medal? I didn't.
- CHRISTINE She didn't say you took the medal. She said you grabbed at it. And that Claude ran away down the beach. Did you have the medal even then?



RHODA No, mommy. Not then.

[*She runs to her mother and kisses her ardently. This time CHRISTINE is the passive one*]

CHRISTINE How did you get the medal?

RHODA Oh, I got it later on.

CHRISTINE How?

RHODA Claude went back on his promise and I followed him up the beach. Then he stopped and said I could wear the medal all day if I gave him fifty cents.

CHRISTINE Is that the truth?

RHODA [*With slight contempt*] Yes, mother. I gave him fifty cents and he let me wear the medal.

CHRISTINE Then why didn't you tell this to Miss Fern when she questioned you?

RHODA Oh, mommy, mommy!
[*She whimpers a little*]
Miss Fern doesn't like me at all! I was afraid she'd think bad things about me if I told her I had the medal!

CHRISTINE You knew how much Mrs. Daigle wanted the medal, didn't you?

RHODA Yes, mother, I guess I did.

CHRISTINE Why didn't you give it to her?
[*RHODA says nothing*]
Mrs. Daigle is heart-broken over Claude's death. It's destroyed her. I don't think she'll ever recover from it.
[*She disengages herself*]
Do you know what I mean?

RHODA Yes, mother, I guess so, mother.

CHRISTINE No. You don't know what I mean.

- RHODA It was silly to want to bury the medal pinned on Claude's coat. Claude was dead. He wouldn't know whether he had the medal pinned on him or not.
[*She senses her mother's sudden feeling of revulsion, and kisses her cheek with hungry kisses*]
I've got the sweetest mother. I tell everybody I've got the sweetest mother in the world!—If she wants a little boy that bad, why doesn't she take one out of the Orphans' Home?
- CHRISTINE Don't touch me! Don't talk to me! We have nothing to say to each other!
- RHODA Well, okay. Okay, mother.

[*She turns away and starts to the den*]
- CHRISTINE Rhoda! When we lived in Baltimore, there was an old lady, Mrs. Clara Post, who liked you very much.
- RHODA Yes.
- CHRISTINE You used to go up to see her every afternoon. She was very old, and liked to show you all her treasures. The one you admired most was a crystal ball, in which opals floated. The old lady promised this treasure to you when she died. One afternoon when the daughter was shopping at the super-market, and you were alone with Mrs. Post, the old lady somehow managed to fall down the spiral backstairs and break her neck. You said she heard a kitten mewing outside and went to see about it and somehow missed her footing and fell five flights to the courtyard below.
- RHODA Yes, it's true.
- CHRISTINE Then you asked the daughter for the crystal ball. She gave it to you, and it's still hanging at the head of your bed.
- RHODA Yes, mother.

CHRISTINE Did you have anything to do, anything at all, no matter how little it was, with Claude getting drowned?

RHODA What makes you ask that, mother?

CHRISTINE Come here, Rhoda. Look me in the eyes and tell me. I must know.

RHODA No, mother. I didn't.

CHRISTINE You're not going back to the Fern School next year. They don't want you any more.

RHODA Okay. Okay.

CHRISTINE [*Crosses to telephone*] I'll call Miss Fern and ask her to come over.

RHODA She'll think I lied to her.

CHRISTINE You did lie to her!

RHODA But not to you, mother! Not to you!

[CHRISTINE rises and goes to the telephone. RHODA watches her with apprehension. CHRISTINE dials a number]

CHRISTINE The Fern School? Is Miss Claudia Fern there?—No. No message.

[*She hangs up*]

She's not home yet.

RHODA What would you tell her, mother?

CHRISTINE No! It can't be true! It can't be true!

[*She turns and looks at Rhoda; then embraces her*]

CURTAIN

Act Two

SCENE 1

The same apartment, late afternoon, the next day. Rhoda is seated at her little table putting a jig-saw puzzle together. She works with intense concentration, trying, rejecting, considering sizes and angles. Christine comes out of the inner hall after Rhoda calls.

MONICA Anybody here?

RHODA Hello, Aunt Monica!

MONICA Hi, honey.

RHODA Mother!

MONICA Oh, Christine! You said I might have Rhoda for a while. And there's a package for you.

CHRISTINE Thank you, Monica. You're always the bringer of gifts.

[She takes a rather bulky carton from Monica]

MONICA This is from somebody else. It was in the package room.

CHRISTINE Oh—for Rhoda, from daddy—

RHODA *[Up at once]* For me?

CHRISTINE Oh, not yet. "In anticipation of her ninth birthday."

RHODA What does anticipation mean?

MONICA Looking forward to it.

CHRISTINE "Not to be opened till—"

RHODA Oh. It's a long time to wait. But I will.

MONICA Isn't she the perfect old-fashioned girl? She'll wait!

CHRISTINE No—there's more in daddy's writing— "Open when you get it—there'll be a real one later."

RHODA But then he wants me to open it now!

CHRISTINE Yes. All it needs is to be slit down this side with the scissors.

RHODA There's excelsior—I can see it.

CHRISTINE It should be opened in the kitchen, Rhoda.

RHODA Okay.

[She takes the package to the kitchen]

MONICA *[Watching Rhoda, waiting till she's out of earshot]* I wish she were mine! Every time I look at her I wish I had just such a little girl.

CHRISTINE She's not wanted in the Fern School next year.

MONICA Why?

CHRISTINE She doesn't fit in, doesn't play the game, she's a poor sport.

MONICA Honestly, the longer I live, the more I see, the less I'm able to understand the tight little minds of people like the Fern girls! The truth of the matter is, Rhoda is much too charming, too clever, too unusual for them! She

makes those others look stupid and stodgy by comparison!

[She lights a cigarette]

Have one?

CHRISTINE I seem to have quit.

MONICA Seem to have! Good God, if I were to quit you'd hear the repercussions in New Orleans! I string along with St. Paul—it's better to smoke than to burn.—Could Rhoda stay up and have dinner with me tonight?

CHRISTINE Yes, she could. I've asked Reginald Tasker over for cocktails and to talk to me about some writing I want to try.

MONICA Fine; there's no reason why Rhoda should hear about his strychnines and belladonnas.

[RHODA comes to the kitchen door with a large paste-board box in her hands]

Rhoda, you're to have dinner with me tonight.

RHODA I am? May I bring my new puzzle?

MONICA You surely may.

CHRISTINE Is that what it was?

RHODA I think it must be the best jig-saw puzzle in the whole world.

[There is a tap at the door and as LEROY speaks it swings open]

LEROY *[Outside]* Leroy.

[LEROY enters with a garbage pail]

RHODA Oh, Leroy, there was a lot of excelsior.

MONICA He'll take care of it.

LEROY Yes, surely, ma'am.

CHRISTINE Don't bother to sweep the kitchen. I'll do it.

[LEROY carries the garbage pail into the kitchen]

RHODA It's a map of Asia with all the animals.

MONICA I have an aversion to cobras, but it's Freudian.

LEROY *[Emerging from the kitchen]* There's a lot of this stuff scattered around, Mis' Penmark.

MONICA Let him sweep it, dear. I shall run up and look at the simmering meat sauce.

RHODA Oh, is it spaghetti?

MONICA It is. Approve?

RHODA My favorite!

MONICA Come up any time. It must be nearly ready.

[She goes out. LEROY begins to sweep in the kitchen. RHODA puts her new puzzle on the table and examines it]

MESSENGER *[In the hall outside]* Mrs. Penmark?

MONICA Yes. This is her door.
[MONICA looks in]
Western Union for you, dear.

CHRISTINE Thank you.
[MONICA disappears, leaving a messenger in her place in the doorway. He hands Christine a yellow envelope. She takes the envelope and the messenger goes, closing the door. CHRISTINE opens the envelope, and reads the message with pleasure]
Ah!

RHODA Is it daddy?

CHRISTINE Not your daddy this time; mine. He's coming here.

RHODA Grandfather?

CHRISTINE Yes. He'll be here tonight.—He can sleep—I think Monica has an extra room—I must run up and ask her! Be right back.

[She goes out. LEROY comes from the kitchen again with the box of excelsior]

LEROY *[Quietly]* There she sits at her little table, doing her puzzle and looking cute and innocent. Looking like she wouldn't melt butter, she's that cool. She can fool some people with that innocent look she can put on and put off when she wants to, but not me. Not even part way, she can't fool me.

[RHODA looks at Leroy as though he bored her, then turns back to the puzzle]

She don't want to talk to nobody smart. She likes to talk to people she can fool, like her mama and Mrs. Breedlove and Mr. Emory.

RHODA Go empty the excelsior. You talk silly all the time. I know what you do with the excelsior. You made a bed of excelsior in the garage behind that old couch, and you sleep there where nobody can see you.

LEROY I been way behind the times here-to-fore, but now I got your number, miss. I been hearing things about you that ain't nice. I been hearing you beat up that poor little Claude in the woods, and it took all three the Fern sisters to pull you off him. I heard you run him off the wharf, he was so scared.

RHODA *[Picking up a piece]* If you tell lies like that you won't go to heaven when you die.

LEROY I heard plenty. I listen to people talk. Not like you who's gabbling all the time and won't let anybody get a word

in edgewise. That's why I know what people are saying and you don't.

RHODA People tell lies all the time. I think you tell them more than anybody else.

LEROY I know what you done to that boy when you got him out on the wharf. You better listen to me if you want to keep out of bad trouble.

RHODA What did I do, if you know so much?

LEROY You picked up a stick and hit him with it. You hit him because he wouldn't give you that medal like you told him to. I thought I'd seen some mean little girls in my time, but you're the meanest. You want to know how I know how mean you are? Because I'm mean. I'm smart and I'm mean. And you're smart and you're mean, and I never get caught and you never get caught.

RHODA I know what you think. I know everything you think. Nobody believes anything you say.

LEROY You want to know what you did after you hit that boy? You jerked the medal off his shirt. Then you rolled that sweet little boy off the wharf, among them pilings.

RHODA You don't know anything. None of what you said is true.

LEROY You know I'm telling the God's truth. You know I got it figured out.

RHODA You figured out something that never happened. And so it's all lies. Take your excelsior down to the garage and put it where you can sleep on it when you're supposed to be working.

LEROY You ain't no dope—that I must say—and that's why you didn't leave that stick where nobody could find it. Oh, no, you got better sense than that. You took that bloody stick and washed it off good, and then you threw it in the woods where nobody could see it.

RHODA I think you're a very silly man.

LEROY It was you was silly, because you thought you could wash off blood—and you can't.

RHODA [*After a pause, putting down a piece*] Why can't you wash off blood?

LEROY Because you can't, and the police know it. You can wash and wash, but there's always some left. Everybody knows that. I'm going to call the police and tell them to start looking for that stick in the woods. They got what they call "stick bloodhounds" to help them look—and them stick bloodhounds can find any stick there is that's got blood on it. And when they bring in that stick you washed so clean the police'll sprinkle that special blood powder on it, and that little boy's blood will show up on the stick. It'll show up a pretty blue color like a robin's egg.

RHODA You're scared about the police yourself!

LEROY Shhh!

RHODA What you say about me, it's all about you! They'll get you with that powder!

[*LEROY hears Mrs. Penmark coming*]

LEROY As far as I'm concerned I wish there was more excelsior. I could use it.

CHRISTINE [*Coming in*] What were you saying to Rhoda?

LEROY Why, Mrs. Penmark, we was just talking. She said it was a big box of excelsior.

CHRISTINE [*Seeing the anger on Rhoda's face, the smirk of triumph on Leroy's*] Just the same you're not to speak to her again. If you do I'll report you! Is that entirely clear?

RHODA I started it, mama. I told him it was a puzzle all about Asia, and I hardly know where anything is in Asia.

CHRISTINE Very well—but don't speak to her!

LEROY Yes, ma'am.

[He goes]

CHRISTINE *[Turning on the lights]* You're really working in the dark here. I think you strain your eyes over these things.

[CHRISTINE wheels a small bar out of the kitchen, set up to serve drinks]

RHODA Mother, is it true that when blood has been washed off anything a policeman can still find it was there if he puts powder on the place? Will the place really turn blue?

CHRISTINE Who's been talking to you about such things? Leroy?

RHODA No, mommy, it wasn't he. It was some man went by the gate in the park.

CHRISTINE I don't know how they test for blood. But I could ask Reginald Tasker. Or Miss Fern; she might know.

RHODA No—don't ask her! Mommy, mommy, mommy!
[She breaks down and cries, deliberately]
Nobody helps me! Nobody believes me! I'm your little girl, and I'm all alone!

CHRISTINE It's not a very good act, Rhoda. You may improve it enough to convince someone who doesn't know you, but at present it's easy to see through.

RHODA *[Wiping away tears with the back of her hand]* Maybe I'd better go up to Monica's and have dinner.

CHRISTINE Yes. She said any time.
[The doorbell rings]
And my company is here.
[She opens the door]
Good evening, Mr. Tasker.

TASKER Good evening.

CHRISTINE This is my daughter, Rhoda.

TASKER [*Entering*] Thanks. Hello, Rhoda.
[*He puts out his hand. She takes it and gives him her best smile*]
Well, isn't she a little sweetheart!

RHODA [*Making her curtsy*] Thank you.

TASKER That's the kind of thing makes an old bachelor wish he were married.

RHODA You like little girls to curtsy?

TASKER It's the best thing left out of the Middle Ages!

RHODA I'm having dinner upstairs.

TASKER The loss is ours, all ours.

CHRISTINE You may go now, Rhoda.

RHODA Yes, mommy.

[*She throws Christine a kiss and runs out*]

TASKER That's a little ray of sunshine, that one. Isn't she?

CHRISTINE I've seen her stormy.

TASKER No doubt. But she's going to make some man very happy. Just that smile.

CHRISTINE Since I called you I've had a wire from my father, and he'll be here tonight. It's a year since I've seen him.

TASKER Bravo's coming?

CHRISTINE Yes.

TASKER Now there's a man I always wanted to meet.

CHRISTINE He may be here before long. He said perhaps for dinner.

TASKER Good. By the way, if you're thinking of writing mystery stories Bravo was quite an authority on crime and criminals early in his career.

CHRISTINE Yes, I know he was.

TASKER He could probably help you more than I could. Before he began covering wars he covered practically all the horror cases, from Leopold and Loeb on.

CHRISTINE What will it be?

TASKER Gin and tonic?

CHRISTINE Good. I'll have it too.—You see, what I wanted to ask was a psychological question and I doubt that it was asked or answered—if it has been—till recently.

[She pauses, pouring into the jigger, getting out the ice]

TASKER I may not know all the answers.

CHRISTINE Well, perhaps nobody does. But the story I was thinking of writing made me wonder—tell me, do children ever commit murders? Or is crime something that's learned gradually, and grows as the criminal grows up, so that only adults do really dreadful things?

TASKER Well, I have thought about that, and so have several authorities I've consulted lately. Yes, children have often committed murders, and quite clever ones too. Some murderers, particularly the distinguished ones who are going to make great names for themselves, start amazingly early.

CHRISTINE In childhood?

TASKER Oh, yes. Just like mathematicians and musicians. Poets develop later. There's never been anything worth while in poetry written before eighteen or twenty. But Mozart

showed his genius at six, Pascal was a master mathematician at twelve, and some of the great criminals were top-flight operators before they got out of short pants and pinafores.

CHRISTINE They grew up in the slums, or among criminals, and learned from their environment?
[*The doorbell chimes*]
Oh—I wonder if that could be father!

TASKER If it is I would like to stay and see him a moment—

CHRISTINE Oh, that's understood!
[*She opens the door*]
Daddy!

[*BRAVO comes into the doorway, a man of fifty-five or sixty, handsome once, but somewhat stern and weary*]

BRAVO Hello, darling. I'm early.

[*CHRISTINE goes into his arms and they kiss, then stand looking at each other. He sets down a small bag*]

CHRISTINE You're here! You're actually here!

BRAVO I guess I'm something of a truant, sweetheart, but you said you wanted to see me, and I wanted to see you, so—

CHRISTINE I'm so glad! This is Reginald Tasker, father.

BRAVO [*Giving his hand to Tasker*] Ah, one of my favorites!

TASKER Puts you to sleep regularly?

BRAVO Sometimes keeps me awake. You've done some impressive research for the Classic Crime Club.

TASKER Now I've always thought the best papers they ever printed were by Richard Bravo.

BRAVO That old dodo! No, no, he's written himself out, and

talked himself out and now he's drifting round the country, working for a second-rate news service.

TASKER You're really looking into this off-side oil?

BRAVO That's what they've got me doing. But I took off and left them, for the moment anyway. I wanted to see my long-lost daughter.

[He puts his arm around Christine]

TASKER I've sometimes wanted to ask you if you've ever considered coming back into the criminology racket. There's been nobody like you since you left.

BRAVO Well, all compliments aside, my latest books didn't sell as well as the first one—and the war came along. Now I write filler.

TASKER You've written some things that won't be forgotten.

BRAVO Let's hope.

TASKER And now your daughter is going to try her hand.

BRAVO At writing? She can't even spell.

CHRISTINE I do get lonely here with Kenneth away, and I thought I'd try to work out a murder mystery, in the evenings.

BRAVO *[To Tasker]* And you're encouraging this competition?

TASKER Well, I was rather stumped by her last question. She was asking whether criminal children are always the product of environment.

BRAVO Nothing difficult about that, little one. They are.

TASKER Now, I'd have said the same, a few years ago—

BRAVO Look, can't I have some of this wicked mixture you're lapping up?

CHRISTINE Of course, daddy—I'm sorry. Do you really think they're always the product of environment?

BRAVO Always.

TASKER I couldn't prove you're wrong, of course. But some doctor friends of mine assure me that we've all been putting too much emphasis on environment and too little on heredity lately. They say there's a type of criminal born with no capacity for remorse or guilt—born with the kind of brain that may have been normal among humans fifty thousand years ago—

BRAVO Do you believe this?

TASKER Well, yes, I guess I do.

BRAVO Well, I don't.

TASKER I've been convinced that there are people—only a few, and certainly very unfortunate—who are incapable from the beginning of acquiring a conscience, or a moral character. Not even able to love, except physically. No feeling for right or wrong.

BRAVO I've heard such assertions, but never found any evidence behind them. If you encounter a human without compassion or pity or morals, he grew up where these things weren't encouraged. That's final and absolute. This stuff you're talking is tommyrot.

[He sips his drink]

CHRISTINE Do your doctor friends have any evidence?

TASKER They can't prove it, but they think there are such people. They say there are children born into the best families, with every advantage of education and discipline—that never acquire any moral scruples. It's as if they were born blind—you couldn't expect to teach them to see.

CHRISTINE And do they look—like brutes?



BRAVO Are you sold on this?

CHRISTINE I want to find out.

TASKER Sometimes they do. But often they present a more convincing picture of virtue than normal folks. A wax rosebud or a plastic peach can look more perfect than the real thing. They imitate humanity beautifully.

CHRISTINE But that's—horrible.

TASKER Some of them seem to have done some pretty horrible things and kept on looking innocent and sweet.

BRAVO I'd like to examine the evidence. Not much sense discussing it till we do.

TASKER Well, this clinic I frequent came long ago to the conclusion that there are bad seeds—just plain bad from the beginning, and nothing can change them.

CHRISTINE And this favorite murderess of yours—the one you were speaking of the other day—is she an instance?

TASKER Bessie Denker—was she a bad seed? Well, she may have been, because the deaths started so early in her vicinity. Bessie earned her sobriquet of "The Destroying Angel" in early childhood.

CHRISTINE Then she began young?

TASKER Yes. The name wasn't applied to her till much later, when the whole story of her career came out, but Bessie was lethal and accurate from the beginning. One of her most famous murders involved the use of the deadly amanita, a mushroom known as "the destroying angel," and some clever reporter transferred the term to her. —In fact, it was a colleague of Mr. Bravo's, unless I've misread something—

BRAVO It may have been—I don't know.

CHRISTINE How did she end?

- TASKER Well, Mr. Bravo knows more about it than I do—
- BRAVO I've forgotten the whole thing. Put it out of my mind. I'm in oil now.
- CHRISTINE Tell me—how did she end?
- BRAVO You don't want to probe into this mess, sweetheart—
- CHRISTINE Yes, I do.
- BRAVO Can't we change the subject?
- CHRISTINE No, darling, I want to know. What was the rest of the story, Mr. Tasker?
- TASKER There's the mystery. By the time the authorities got really roused about her she disappeared from the Middle West—just seemed to vanish. She had quite a fortune by that time. The fellow that seems to know most about her maintains that she went to Australia. A similar beauty emerged in Melbourne; her name was Beulah Demerest, so if it was the same person she didn't have to change the initials on her linen or silver.
- CHRISTINE How could she—kill so many—and leave no trace?
- TASKER [*To Bravo*] You wrote a famous essay listing all her methods—you must know it better than I do—
- BRAVO Not at all. I've dropped all that—haven't read the recent literature.
- CHRISTINE Did she ever use violence?
- TASKER Forgive me, sir, I'll make it short. She made a specialty of poisons—studied not only drugs and toxins but the lives of those she wished to kill. It's practically impossible to prove murder when the victim dies of rattlesnake venom in Western Colorado. Too many diamond-backs about. And tetanus can be picked up in any barnyard. She made use of such things.—It all came to a sudden

end—she was indicted again and took off for parts unknown—leaving no—but wasn't there a child, a little girl?

BRAVO Never heard of one. That must be a recent addition to the myth.

CHRISTINE I wanted to ask one more question. Was she ever found out here?

TASKER Not in this country. Three juries looked at that lovely dewy face and heard that melting cultured voice and said, "She couldn't have done it."

CHRISTINE She wasn't convicted?

TASKER "Not guilty." Three times.

CHRISTINE You think she was one of these poor deformed children, born without pity?

TASKER Personally, I guess I do.

CHRISTINE Did she have an enchanting smile?

TASKER Dazzling, by all accounts.

CHRISTINE She was doomed?

TASKER Absolutely. Doomed to commit murder after murder till somehow or other she was found out.

CHRISTINE She'd have been better off if she'd died young.

TASKER And society would. And yet sometimes I wonder whether these malignant brutes may not be the mutation that survives on this planet in this age. This age of technology and murder-for-empire. Maybe the softies will have to go, and the snake-hearted will inherit the earth.

BRAVO I'm betting on the democracies.

- TASKER And so am I. But we're living in an age of murder. In all history there have never been so many people murdered as in our century. Add up all the murders from the beginning of history to 1900, and then add the murders after 1900, and our century wins. All alone. —And on that merry note I think I should take my leave, for I meant not to bother you and I've been lecturing.
- BRAVO You've got a highly questionable theory there—about heredity.
- TASKER I'd like to go into that with you when there's more time.
- BRAVO Let's do that next time I'm in town.
- TASKER Right. And now I'll say good evening. Mrs. Penmark—I'm afraid the pleasure's been all mine.
- CHRISTINE Not at all. I'll call you early in the week.
- TASKER I'm always about. [*To Bravo*] Good night, sir.
- BRAVO Good night, Mr. Tasker.
- CHRISTINE Good night.
- [*TASKER goes out*]
- BRAVO Are you really planning to write something?
- CHRISTINE I was just asking questions. You saw Kenneth in Washington?
- BRAVO Yes. He's looking well. As well as possible when a fellow's hot, sticky, tired, and, most of all, lonesome.
- CHRISTINE We'd counted on going somewhere this summer. Then there was a sudden change of orders.
- BRAVO Am I looking too close, or is there something heavy on your mind?

CHRISTINE Does something show in my face?

BRAVO Everything shows in your face. It always did.

CHRISTINE I'm not sure I'm worried about anything—now that you're here. I always felt so safe and comfortable when you were in the room. And you have the same effect now.

BRAVO To tell you the truth you did a magic for me. I'd always wanted a little girl and you were everything lovely a little girl could be for her old dad. But, Christine, what did you want to ask me—that night you phoned?

CHRISTINE Let me think a minute.—Would you have another drink?

BRAVO Yes, I guess I will.
[*He looks at the bar*]
Let me fix something. Will you have more gin and tonic?

[*He goes to the bar*]

CHRISTINE No, thank you.

BRAVO Speak up, darling. It's between us, whatever it is.

CHRISTINE My landlady here is—is a sort of amateur psychiatrist—a devotee of Freud, constantly analyzing.

BRAVO I know the sort.

CHRISTINE Her name is Breedlove. You'll meet her, because she's offered a wonderful room for you to stay in while you're here. Rhoda's having dinner with her tonight.

BRAVO You were going to come out with something.

CHRISTINE Yes. Well, what I was going to ask reminded me of her. I confessed to her the other day that I had always worried about being an adopted child—had always been afraid that mommy wasn't really my mother and the daddy I love so much wasn't really my daddy.

- BRAVO What did she say?
- CHRISTINE She said it was one of the commonest fantasies of childhood. Everybody has it. She had it herself.
- BRAVO It certainly is common.
- CHRISTINE But that doesn't help me. I still feel, just as strongly as ever, that old fear that you're not really mine.
- BRAVO Has something made you think of this lately?
- CHRISTINE Yes.
- BRAVO What is it?
- CHRISTINE My little girl, Rhoda.
- BRAVO What about her?
- CHRISTINE She terrifies me. I'm afraid for her. I'm afraid of **what** she may have inherited from me.
- BRAVO What could she have inherited?
- CHRISTINE Father—daddy—whose child am I?
- BRAVO Mine.
- CHRISTINE Daddy, dear, don't lie to me. It's gone beyond where that will help. I've told you about a dream I have—and I'm not sure it's all a dream. Whose child am I? Are you my father?
- [BRAVO *is silent*]
- This is a strange question to greet you with after being so long away from you—but I—I have to ask it. **And** for Rhoda's sake—and mine—you must tell me.
- BRAVO What has Rhoda done?
- CHRISTINE I don't know. But I'm afraid.

BRAVO It cannot be inherited. It cannot.

[He draws a deep breath, then takes a step and staggers slightly, putting out a hand for support]

CHRISTINE Father, you're not well!

[She goes to him. He sinks into a chair]

BRAVO I'm all right, just get me a glass of water.

[She gets a glass from the kitchen]

Perfectly well. A trace of fibrillation once in a while, quite normal at my age. Thank you. And with fibrillation there's a slight dizziness, also normal. I'm all right now.

CHRISTINE I won't ask any more questions. I'm sorry.

BRAVO I think that's better. Let's just close the book.

CHRISTINE *[After a pause]* Only I have the answer now.

BRAVO The answer?

CHRISTINE Yes.

BRAVO I've been a very fortunate man, Christine. I could tell you a long history of jobs that came in the nick of time, of lost money found, of friends who showed up to pay old debts just when I had to have the money. At every main turning-point in my life some good fairy has seemed to intervene to flip things my way. And the biggest piece of luck I ever had—the luck that saved my reason and kept me going—was a little girl named Christine. You were the only child I ever had. My life was futile and barren before you came, but you were magic for me, as I said, and you made life bearable. I kept on—because of you.

CHRISTINE You don't have to say any more.

BRAVO I don't, do I?

CHRISTINE You found me somewhere.

BRAVO Yes. In a very strange place—in a strange way.

CHRISTINE I know the place.

BRAVO I don't think you could. You were less than two years old.

CHRISTINE I either remember it or I dreamed it.

BRAVO What kind of dream?

CHRISTINE I dream of a bedroom in a farmhouse in a countryside where there are orchards. I sleep in the room with my brother, who is older than I—and my—is it my mother?—comes to take care of him. She is a graceful, lovely woman, like an angel. I suppose my brother must have died, for afterward I'm alone in the room. One night I awake feeling terrified and for some reason I can't stay in that house. It's moonlight and I somehow get out the window, drop to the grass below and hide myself in the tall weeds beyond the first orchard. I don't recall much more except that toward morning I'm thirsty and keep eating the yellow pippins that fall from the tree—and when the first light comes up on the clouds I can hear my mother calling my name. I hide in the weeds and don't answer. Is this a dream? Is it only a dream?

BRAVO What name did she call?

CHRISTINE It isn't Christine. It—is it—could it be Ingold?

BRAVO You remember that name?

CHRISTINE Yes, it comes back to me. "Ingold! Ingold Denker," she was calling. Denker? You've concealed something from me all these years, haven't you, daddy? I came out of that terrible household! You found me there!

BRAVO The neighbors found you after your mother vanished. Where she went I never knew, nor did they, but she



had quite a fortune by that time, and something had panicked her—so she quickly got away, leaving one child, an astonishingly sweet and beautiful little thing with the most enchanting smile I've ever seen. I was covering the case for a Chicago paper, and I wired my wife to join me. We couldn't resist you.

CHRISTINE Oh, daddy, daddy! Oh, God help me! Why didn't you leave me there? Why didn't I die in the orchard and end the agony then?

BRAVO It was the neighbors found you and saved you. Would you rather have stayed with them?

CHRISTINE Oh, no, you know I wouldn't. You've been a wonderful father! But—that place—and that evil woman—my mother—!

BRAVO There are places and events in every man's life he'd rather not remember. Don't let it hurt you now. It's past and doesn't touch you.

CHRISTINE I wish I had died then! I wish it! I wish it!

BRAVO It hasn't mattered where you came from! You've been sound and sweet and loving! You've given me more than I ever gave or could ever repay! If you'd been my own I couldn't have hoped for more! You knew nothing but love and kindness and you've given love and kindness and sweetness all your life! Kenneth loves you, and you've made him happy. And Rhoda's a perfect, sweet, sound little girl!

CHRISTINE Is she, father? Is she?

BRAVO What has she done?

CHRISTINE She's—it's as if she were born blind!

BRAVO It cannot happen! It does not happen!

[*The doorbell chimes and MONICA comes in*]

- MONICA Excuse me, please, but Rhoda has eaten her dinner, tired of her puzzle and now she wants a book.
- CHRISTINE We haven't even started yet.
- MONICA And I haven't met Mr. Bravo.
[*She puts out her hand*]
I'm Mrs. Breedlove. The oversized analyst who's going to put you up, and promises not to annoy you.
- BRAVO You know what newspaper men are like—crusty, bitter, irascible. If you can put up with me you're a saint.
- [*RHODA enters*]
- RHODA Granddaddy!
- BRAVO Rhoda!
- [*He picks her up and puts her down*]
- MONICA Isn't she perfection?
- RHODA Next to daddy, you lift me up best! Why do you look at me?
- BRAVO I want to see your face.
- MONICA You know, Mr. Bravo, these Penmarks are the most enchanting neighbors I've ever had. Now I'll want Rhoda for dinner every night. Tell me, didn't you write the FINGERPRINT SERIES?
- BRAVO I'm afraid I was very guilty of that about twenty years ago.
- MONICA I read the first volume to pieces, and wept over it till the parts I loved most were illegible—and then bought another!
- BRAVO I've finally met my public.
- MONICA I don't disappoint you? Anyway I'm large.

BRAVO I like the way you read books to pieces. It's good for royalties.

CHRISTINE It's time to get dinner for us.

BRAVO Maybe I should find my room and get ready for the evening.

MONICA I'll take you up if you'd like to go now.

BRAVO If you'll be so kind.

MONICA It's the floor above. Be back, Christine.

[BRAVO picks up his small bag and goes out with MONICA. CHRISTINE goes into the kitchen to get dinner. RHODA goes to the inner hall, and then comes out furtively, carrying a newspaper package. CHRISTINE emerges from the kitchen]

CHRISTINE What are you doing?

RHODA Nothing.

CHRISTINE Is that for the incinerator?

RHODA Yes.

CHRISTINE What is it?

RHODA Some things you told me to throw away.

CHRISTINE Let me see what's in the package.

RHODA No.

CHRISTINE Let me see it!

[She tries to take the bundle from a sullen Rhoda. RHODA suddenly snatches it back and tries to run. CHRISTINE holds on determinedly, and RHODA begins to bite and kick like a little animal. The package tears, revealing Rhoda's shoes. CHRISTINE wrests the bundle

away, and pushes Rhoda violently from her, so that she falls into a chair, staring at her mother with cold, fixed hatred]

You hit him with one of the shoes, didn't you? Tell me! Tell me the truth! You hit him with those shoes! That's how those half-moon marks got on his forehead and hands! Answer me! Answer me!

RHODA I hit him with the shoes! I had to hit him with the shoes, mother! What else could I do?

CHRISTINE Do you know that you murdered him?

RHODA It was his fault! If he'd given me the medal like I told him to I wouldn't have hit him!

[She begins to cry, pressing her forehead against table]

CHRISTINE Tell me what happened. I want the truth this time. Start from the beginning and tell me how it happened. I know you killed him, so there's no sense in lying again.

RHODA *[Throwing herself into her mother's arms]* I can't, mother! I can't tell you!

CHRISTINE *[Shaking Rhoda]* I'm waiting for your answer! Tell me. I must know now!

RHODA He wouldn't give me the medal like I told him to, that's all. So then he ran away from me and hid on the wharf, but I found him there and told him I'd hit him with my shoe if he didn't give me the medal. He shook his head and said, "No," so I hit him the first time and then he took off the medal and gave it to me.

CHRISTINE What happened then?

RHODA Well, he tried to run away, so I hit him with the shoe again. He kept crying and making a noise, and I was afraid somebody would hear him. So I kept on hitting him, mother. I hit him harder this time, and he fell in the water.

CHRISTINE Oh, my God, my God! What are we going to do, what are we going to do?

RHODA [*Coquettishly*] Oh, I've got the prettiest mother! I've got the nicest mother! That's what I tell everybody! I say, "I've got the sweetest—"

CHRISTINE How did the bruises get on the back of his hands?

RHODA He tried to pull himself back on the wharf after he fell in the water. I wouldn't have hit him any more only he kept saying he was going to tell on me. Mother, mother, please say you won't let them hurt me! Please!

CHRISTINE [*Putting her arms around Rhoda*] Nobody will hurt you. I don't know what must be done now, but I promise you nobody will hurt you.

RHODA I want to play the way we used to, mommy. Will you play with me? If I give you a basket of kisses what will you give me?

CHRISTINE Please, please.

RHODA Can't you give me the answer, mother? If I give you a basket of kisses—

CHRISTINE Rhoda, go into your room and read. I must think what to do.—You must promise you won't tell anyone else what you've told me. Do you understand?

RHODA [*With contempt*] Why would I tell and get killed?

CHRISTINE What happened to old Mrs. Post in Baltimore? I know so much, another won't matter now.

RHODA There was ice on the steps—and I slipped and fell against her, and—and that was all.

CHRISTINE That was all?

RHODA No. I slipped on purpose.

CHRISTINE Take the shoes and put them in the incinerator! Hurry! Hurry, Rhoda! Put them in the incinerator! Burn them quickly!

[RHODA *takes the bundle*]

RHODA What will you do with the medal, mother?

CHRISTINE I must think of something to do.

RHODA You won't give it to Miss Fern?

CHRISTINE No, I won't give it to Miss Fern.

[RHODA *smiles and goes toward the door*]

C U R T A I N

Act Two

SCENE 2

After breakfast in the apartment, the next morning. At rise the stage is empty and the phone ringing. Leroy enters the front door.

LEROY Leroy.
[He looks at phone, starts toward kitchen and decides to answer phone. Goes back and takes it off the hook and hangs up. He starts back toward the kitchen and the phone rings again. RHODA enters from the kitchen]
You better answer that phone.

RHODA *[At the phone]* Hello—no, Mr. Bravo isn't here. Yes, I could write down a number.—Yes, sir.—I'll tell him. Goodbye. *[To Leroy]* I found out about one lie that you told. There's no such thing as a "stick bloodhound."

LEROY I'm not supposed to talk to little Miss Goody-goody.

RHODA Then don't.

LEROY Where's your mother?

RHODA Upstairs.

LEROY For your own sake, though, I'll tell you this much. There may not be any stick blood-hounds, but there's a stick. And you better find that stick before they do,

because it'll turn blue and then they'll fry you in the electric chair.

RHODA There wasn't any stick any more than there were stick blood-hounds.

LEROY You know the noise the electric chair makes? It goes z—z—z, and then you swivel all up the way bacon does when your mother's frying it.

RHODA Go empty the garbage. They don't put little girls in the electric chair.

LEROY They don't? They got a little blue chair for boys and a little pink one for girls. I just remembered something. Just the morning of the picnic I wiped off your shoes with the cleats on 'em. You used to go tap-tap-tap on the walk. How come you don't wear 'em any more?

RHODA You're silly. I never had a pair of shoes like that.

LEROY They used to go tap-tap when you walked and I didn't like it. I spilled water on 'em and I wiped 'em off.

RHODA They hurt my feet and I gave them away.

LEROY You know one thing? You didn't hit that boy with no stick. You hit him with them shoes. Ain't I right this time?

RHODA You're silly.

LEROY You think I'm silly because I said about the stick. All I was trying was to make you say "No, it wasn't no stick. It was my shoes." Because I knew what it was.

RHODA You lie all the time. All the time.

LEROY How come I've got those shoes then?

RHODA Where did you get them?

LEROY I came in and got them right out of your apartment.

RHODA [*Looking at book*] It's just more lies. I burned those shoes. I put them down the incinerator and burned them. Nobody's got them.

LEROY [*After a pause*] I don't say that wasn't smart. That was.—Only suppose I heard something coming rattling down the incinerator and I says to myself, "It sounds to me like a pair of shoes with cleats." Oh, I'm not saying you didn't burn 'em a little, but you didn't burn 'em all up like you wanted to.

RHODA [*Waits with a new frightening stillness and intensity*] Yes?—

LEROY Now listen to this and figure out which of us is the silly one. I'm in the basement working, and I hear them shoes come rattling down the pipe. I open the door quick and there they is on top of the coals only smoking the least little bit. I grab them out. Oh, they're scorched some, but there's plenty left to turn blue and show where the blood was. There's plenty left to put you in the electric chair!

[He laughs a foolish little laugh of triumph]

RHODA [*Calmly*] Give me those shoes back.

LEROY Oh, no. I got them shoes hid where nobody but me can find them.

RHODA You'd better give me those shoes. They're mine. Give them back to me.

LEROY I'm not giving them shoes back to nobody, see?

RHODA [*With cold fury*] You'd better give them back to me, Leroy.

LEROY [*Laughing*] I'm keeping them shoes until—
[His laughter dies under her fixed, cold stare. He begins to be afraid of her. He no longer wants to play this game]

Who said I had any shoes except mine?

RHODA You did. You get them and give them back.

LEROY Now, listen, Rhoda, I was just fooling and teasing you. I haven't got any shoes. I've got work to do.

[*He starts out*]

RHODA Give me back my shoes.

LEROY I haven't got nobody's shoes. Don't you know when anybody's teasing you?

RHODA Give them back!

LEROY Go and practice your piano lesson! I haven't got 'em, I keep telling you.

RHODA Will you bring them back!

LEROY [*Looking in*] I was just fooling at first, but now I really believe you killed that little boy. I really believe you did kill him with your shoes.

RHODA You've got them hid, but you'd better get them and bring them back here! Right here to me!

LEROY [*Outside*] Quit talking loud. There's someone in the hall!

[*CHRISTINE enters*]

CHRISTINE What was Leroy saying to you?

RHODA Nothing.

CHRISTINE I heard you say, "Bring them back here!"

RHODA He said he had my shoes.

LEROY I got nobody's shoes but my own. There's a number for Mr. Bravo to call.

CHRISTINE You may go, Leroy.

LEROY Yes, ma'am.

[He exits]

CHRISTINE Daddy, there is a message for you.

BRAVO *[Entering]* Thank you, sweetheart.

[He takes the phone and dials]

MONICA *[Entering]* Look what I have for you, Rhoda! Turquoise! And the garnet, too!

RHODA Thank you, Aunt Monica.

BRAVO Hello. Listen, Murry, I know I ran out on you but this was imperative. Just wouldn't wait.—When does it leave?—Yes, I've had breakfast. If I get a taxi now I could just make it.—Yes, I've never been on the rig. I'd like to see it. And remember I've never missed a deadline. Think nothing of it.

[He hangs up]

I'll be gone a couple of days, but I plan to make this my headquarters the next few weeks if I may—

MONICA As long as you can stand us—

BRAVO Rhoda.

RHODA Yes, granddaddy.

BRAVO You ought to patent your smile. It does unfair things to your elders. . . . I really have to go, dear. I'll pick up the taxi at the corner.

[He puts his arms around Christine]

You are the bright thing in my life, Christine. It was you I lived for. You I loved. No matter what happens I want you to remember that. Don't worry. It will come out well.

CHRISTINE Come back soon.

- BRAVO I will, sweetheart.
[*He kisses Christine briefly*]
My bag's upstairs. Don't come along. It'll be quicker.

[*He goes out*]
- MONICA What a trouper!
[*There is a sound of ice cream bells*]
Ah, the ice cream man!
- RHODA Mother, could I have a popsicle?
- CHRISTINE Yes. Take the money from my purse.
[*RHODA runs into the kitchen, then, coming out, stops to pick up matches as she passes the stove*]
It is hot today.
- MONICA Yes, the streets seem deserted.
- CHRISTINE Rhoda, what have you got those for?
- RHODA I guess I just wasn't thinking.
- CHRISTINE I'll take them, please.

[*She takes the matches and goes into the kitchen. RHODA picks up another box and runs out. CHRISTINE re-enters*]
- MONICA You won't mind too much if I'm nosey and ridiculous, Christine. You haven't been yourself lately. It's as if something's dragging you down.
- CHRISTINE Oh, dear. Do I seem that way to others?
- MONICA You mean you feel it?
- CHRISTINE Yes.
- MONICA Do you take vitamins regularly?
- CHRISTINE No.

MONICA You should. That's one of the things we know. I have an awfully good combination, and I'll bring some down if I may.— And now you must really forgive me. Have you and Kenneth come to a parting of the ways? Is his secretary more to him than an expert on politics? Does she make a nest for him among the office buildings?

CHRISTINE It's nothing like that, Monica. I wish I were as sure of other things as I am of Kenneth.

MONICA Then do you suspect some disease—something like cancer, for example? If you do, we must face it and do everything that can be done. And a lot can be.

CHRISTINE I'm perfectly healthy as far as I know.

MONICA Do you sleep enough?

CHRISTINE Well, no. Not always.

MONICA You must have some sleeping pills. That much we can do. And now I won't bully you any more, Christine. I'm only going to say that I love you truly and deeply, my dear, as though you were my own; in fact Emory feels the same way about you, but I needn't tell you that, for you know it already.

[CHRISTINE puts her head down on the table and sobs]
Tell me what it is, dear. You can trust me.

[CHRISTINE gets up blindly, puts her arms around Monica, and weeps without restraint]

Dear, dear Christine. You'll feel better now. Perhaps you can get some sleep.

[The doorbell rings, and CHRISTINE stirs herself slowly to answer it]

MONICA Damn, I'll get rid of whatever—

[She goes to the door and opens it. MRS. DAIGLE stands in the doorway]

MRS. DAIGLE Well, Mrs. Breedlove. Hi. You don't want me here, and I don't want to be here, but I can't stay away, so I got a little drunk and came over. Excuse it, please.

MONICA You're very welcome.

[But the words come hard]

MRS. DAIGLE Like a skunk, I know. Mrs. Breedlove knows everybody. Knows even me.

CHRISTINE How are you, Mrs. Daigle?

MRS. DAIGLE I'm half seas over, as the fellow—I just want to talk to your little girl. She was one of the last to see my Claude alive.

CHRISTINE Yes, I know.

MRS. DAIGLE Where do you keep the perfect little lady that was the last to see Claude? I thought I'd just hold her in my arms and we'd have a nice talk and maybe she'd remember something. Any little thing.

CHRISTINE She's out playing.

MRS. DAIGLE I'm just unfortunate, that's all. Drunk and unfortunate. Only she was right outside when I came by, ladies and gentlemen.

CHRISTINE *[Going to the window]* She isn't there now. I don't see her.

[But she couldn't, for her life, call Rhoda]

MRS. DAIGLE She's a perfect little lady, never gives any trouble, that's what I heard. Have you got anything to drink in the house? Anything at all. I'm not the fussy type. I prefer bourbon and water but anything will do.

[CHRISTINE goes to kitchen and wheels out the bar]

Oh, ain't we swank? Really Plaza and Astor!

[MRS. DAIGLE pours herself a straight drink and downs it at a gulp, then takes a taste of water]

What I came here for was to have a little talk with Rhoda, because she knows something. I've called Miss Fern on the telephone a dozen times, but she just gives

me the brush-off.
[She sits rather clumsily]
 She knows something, all right.

CHRISTINE Are you comfortable there?

MRS. DAIGLE I'm not intoxicated in the slightest degree. Kindly don't talk down to me, Mrs. Penmark. I've been through enough, without that.

[The door opens and RHODA enters, delicately eating her popsicle]

RHODA I brought back change, mother.

CHRISTINE Very well. Mrs. Daigle wants to see you.

MRS. DAIGLE So this is your little girl? Claude spoke of you so often, and in such high terms. You were one of his dearest friends, I'm sure. He said you were so bright in school. So you're Rhoda.

RHODA Yes.

MRS. DAIGLE Come let me look at you, Rhoda. Now how about giving your Aunt Hortense a big kiss?
[RHODA gives her popsicle to Monica and goes dutifully to be kissed]

You were with Claude when he had his accident, weren't you dear? You're the little girl who was so sure she was going to win the penmanship medal, and worked so hard. But you didn't win it after all, did you, darling? Claude won the medal, didn't he? Now tell me this: would you say he won it fair and square or he cheated? These things are so important to me now he's dead. Would you say it was fair Claude had the medal? Because if it was fair why did you go after him for it?

RHODA I want my popsicle.

MONICA Rhoda, if you're going shopping with me, you'll have to come now. Mr. Pageson is going to show us his collection.

MRS. DAIGLE Right now?

MONICA We're a little late as it is. Bring your popsicle, Rhoda. You can wash upstairs.

[MONICA disengages Rhoda from Mrs. Daigle and ushers her out of the room]

MRS. DAIGLE Well, I must say!

CHRISTINE They do have an appointment.

MRS. DAIGLE I'm sure they do, practically sure. Of course, I didn't know Rhoda had all these social obligations. I thought she was like any little girl that stayed home and minded her mother, and didn't go traipsing all over town with important appointments. I'm sorry I interfered with Rhoda's social life. I'm sorry, Christine, and I offer my deepest apologies. I'll apologize to Rhoda too when I can have an interview with her.

CHRISTINE You haven't interfered at all.

[The telephone rings. CHRISTINE answers it]

MRS. DAIGLE I wasn't going to contaminate Rhoda in the slightest degree, I assure you.

CHRISTINE [On the phone] Hello. Yes, Mr. Daigle. Yes, she's here. Not at all.

[She hangs up]

MRS. DAIGLE Did you tell him I was drinking and making a spectacle of myself? Did you tell him to call the patrol wagon?

CHRISTINE You heard what I said. I said only that you were here. Your husband said he was in the drugstore on the corner.

MRS. DAIGLE I was just going to hold her in my arms and ask her a few simple questions.



CHRISTINE Perhaps another time would be better.

MRS. DAIGLE You think because I'm lit, but I'm not lit in the slightest degree, I assure you. But Rhoda knows more than she's told anybody, if you'll pardon me for being presumptuous. I talked to that guard, remember. It was a long interesting conversation, and he said he saw Rhoda on the wharf just before Claude was found among the pilings. She knows something she hasn't told, all right. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "How can I get rid of this pest?" You may fool some with that mealy mouth, but you look like "Ned in the primer" to me.

CHRISTINE Then perhaps you'd better not come here again.

MRS. DAIGLE I wouldn't come here again for a million dollars laid out in a line! I wouldn't have come *this* time if I'd known about Rhoda's social obligations.

[She pours herself another drink]

I won't wait for Mr. Daigle. I'll go home by myself. I know where I'm not wanted, and I'm not wanted in a place where people have all these social obligations, if you get what I mean. You're looking sort of sick and sloppy. Come over to my house and I'll give you a free beauty treatment if you're pressed for ready cash. It won't cost you a nickel.

[The doorbell rings and CHRISTINE opens the door. MR. DAIGLE is there]

MR. DAIGLE Thank you, Mrs. Penmark. Come, Hortense, it's time to go home.

MRS. DAIGLE Oh, my God, oh, my God, it's time to go home!
[She embraces Christine at the door, resting her head on Christine's shoulder]

Christine, you know something! You know something, and you won't tell me!

[The DAIGLES go out. CHRISTINE stands for a moment, thinking, then goes to the phone and dials the operator]

- CHRISTINE *[Into the phone]* Operator, I want to call Washington, D. C.
 [She covers the speaker]
 Kenneth, darling, Kenneth, my dear love, what can I say to you? That our daughter is a——
 [She speaks into the phone]
 Never mind, then. No, cancel it.
- [She hangs up]*
- [The door opens and MONICA comes in, looks quickly around]*
- MONICA Good, she's gone. Sweet, I know I shouldn't take things into my all too capable hands, but I couldn't let her paw Rhoda any longer.
- CHRISTINE Mr. Daigle came for her.
- MONICA And I fear I've loosened discipline just a little. I let Rhoda go down for another popsicle.
- CHRISTINE Did she want a second? That's most unusual.
- MONICA She seemed quite eager. And since she's not one of these fat and self-indulgent little blobs I doubt that it can do any harm.—By the way, here are the vitamins and the sleep-capsules, both plainly marked.
- CHRISTINE Thank you, Monica. I'll keep them separate.
- MONICA Emory called while I was upstairs. He's coming by with Reggie Tasker to store some fishing equipment they bought this morning, so I'll get lunch for them. Wouldn't you like to run up and eat with us—you and Rhoda both?
- CHRISTINE Monica—I'd—I'd rather not, really.
- MONICA You poor girl, I do bully you, and I promised not to!
- A VOICE *[Off-stage]* Fire! Fire!

CHRISTINE What was that?

MONICA It sounded a little like somebody shouting, "Fire! Fire!"
It sounded near-by.

[Other voices are now heard shouting, this time much nearer, and they are definitely crying "fire"]

EMORY [Off-stage] Fire! Fire!

TASKER [Off-stage] Fire! Emory! This way!

[RHODA comes in. She has finished her second popsicle, and goes calmly to the den]

CHRISTINE Rhoda, who was shouting?

RHODA I don't know, mother.

CHRISTINE It sounds as if there were a fire!

RHODA I don't think so, mother.

[She goes to den, closes door, and begins to play "Clair de Lune"]

TASKER [Outside] Fire! Fire!

EMORY [Outside] Fire! Fire! The garage door!

[There is a rush of feet off-stage, and other voices add to the calling]

VOICES [Outside] Break the door down! Is anybody in there?
Fire! Fire! That's Leroy's door! Break it down! Fire! I
can hear him! Break it down! Break it down!

[There is a sudden ragged crash below, as if a door were split from top to bottom, and a man's screaming, as if he were in extreme pain]

THE MAN [Screaming unintelligibly] I haven't got 'em! I wasn't
gonna do nothing! I was just saying it to tease you! I

haven't got 'em, I never had 'em, I was just— Oh God, oh God!

MONICA *[At the window]* There's a man on fire!

CHRISTINE His clothes are burning! His hair is burning!

[The piano continues to tinkle]

MONICA Emory's there—and Reggie!

[There is a man's scream, then silence]

CHRISTINE It's too late! He fell just before he got to the pond! He's lying still!

[She slips to her knees, half-fainting]

MONICA *[Trying to draw Christine from the window]* Whatever can be done will be done.

CHRISTINE I should have known it was coming! I should have known! Why am I so blind?

MONICA Thank God Rhoda was in the den playing the piano!

CHRISTINE The fire was in the garage! Where Leroy was!

MONICA There's nothing we can do.

CHRISTINE This time I saw it! I saw it with my own eyes. Tell them to stop screaming! It won't help to scream!

MONICA Christine, Christine! You aren't making sense!

CHRISTINE Tell her to stop the piano—and stop the screaming—I can hear it still, the man is still screaming, Monica, still screaming, and the piano going on and on while he's dying in fire, screaming, screaming a man's scream! *[The doorbell rings]*
I don't want to see anybody now.

MONICA It's probably Emory and Reggie, dear.

[CHRISTINE remains sobbing on the chair, MONICA goes to open the door]

EMORY [At the door] Everything all right?

MONICA Come in.

[EMORY and TASKER come in, coats off and somewhat disarranged from a sudden encounter with fire-fighting]

EMORY We thought you'd be here. It was just a little flare-up in the garage; it's out now, but I guess Leroy—

MONICA Never mind—

CHRISTINE You can say it. I know about Leroy—I saw him burning, I saw him run down the walk and die! Could there be any worse than that?

TASKER I guess you did see the worst of it, Mrs. Penmark. What seems to have happened is that he fell asleep on a bed he'd made out of excelsior, out in the garage, and his cigarette set fire to the stuff.

EMORY And excelsior burns like gasoline when it's dry.

[A siren is heard approaching]

MONICA You'd better leave me alone with Christine for a minute.

TASKER That will be the ambulance.

EMORY We can take care of that.

[EMORY and TASKER go out. The tune continues in the den]

CHRISTINE I can't bear it! I can't bear it! She's driving me mad!
[She leaps up and runs toward the den]
How can she play that tinkle now? Rhoda! Rhoda!

MONICA What is it, Christine? What is it?

[She catches Christine's shoulders and holds her]

CHRISTINE It's heartless; I can't bear it! I can't, I tell you! Rhoda! Rhoda! Will you stop that music!

[But it continues]

MONICA Try to make sense, dear!

CHRISTINE Rhoda! Rhoda! Stop that music!

[RHODA comes out of the den, wide-eyed and innocent]

RHODA Is mommy sick, Monica?

CHRISTINE Don't let me get my hands on her.

MONICA Christine, she's only a child.

CHRISTINE You didn't see it! You could look away and play the piano, but it happened!

MONICA Christine. Please be sensible. What has she done?

CHRISTINE It's not what she's done—it's what I've done.

RHODA What does she mean, Monica?

MONICA I don't know, Rhoda. She'd better have lunch upstairs with me, Christine. She'll stay till you're calmer.

CHRISTINE Yes, take her.

[She sinks into a chair, shivering]

MONICA Will you be all right?

CHRISTINE Yes, I'm all right. Only the screaming goes on and on.

[She covers her eyes]

MONICA We'll come down for you. Come, Rhoda.

[RHODA takes Monica's hand and they go out. CHRISTINE still sits, shivering, and her voice drops to a moan]

CHRISTINE She killed him. And I love her.—Oh, my baby, my baby!

[She puts her head in her arms and weeps silently]

CURTAIN

Act Two

SCENE 3

After dinner in the apartment, the same day. Rhoda is on the couch, in pajamas, ready for bed. Christine is reading to her as in the third scene of Act One.

CHRISTINE "Polly put one toe out from under the covers to find out how cold it was, and it was nipping cold. She remembered why she had wanted to wake up, and got out of bed very softly, shivering and pulling on her dress and her stockings. She had never seen a Christmas tree decorated and lighted the way they are at Christmas in houses where children have fathers and it isn't hard times. She had promised herself that she would see one."
[CHRISTINE *pauses and looks at Rhoda*]

You have some new vitamins to take tonight.

RHODA New ones?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA Are those the vitamins?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA May I see them please?

[CHRISTINE *gives Rhoda the bottle*]

CHRISTINE Yes, of course. They're some that Monica sent down for us.

RHODA Okay, mommy. I think Monica likes me.

CHRISTINE I'm sure she does.

RHODA Swallowing pills is just a trick.

CHRISTINE You're very good at it.

RHODA Do you love me, mommy?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA Mommy, do you know about Leroy?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA You told me to put my shoes in the incinerator, didn't you?

CHRISTINE Yes.

RHODA Did you do something with the medal?

CHRISTINE I drove out to Benedict today to see Miss Fern. And then I made an excuse to go on the pier alone—and dropped the medal in the deep water there.

RHODA Mommy, Leroy had my shoes, and he said he was going to give them to the police and then tell them about me—and they'd put me in the electric chair. So—I had to—

CHRISTINE You don't need to say any more.

RHODA Will you read more now?

CHRISTINE Take these first.

[Giving her a number of pills]

RHODA So many?

CHRISTINE They're a new kind. I'm to take them, too.

RHODA [Taking the pills] I like apricot juice. It doesn't even need ice. Mommy, I took another box of matches, and I lit the excelsior and I locked the door. But it wasn't my fault, mommy. It was Leroy's fault. He shouldn't have said he'd tell the police about me and give them my shoes.

CHRISTINE I know.

RHODA There. That's all. Don't let them hurt me, mommy.

CHRISTINE No, dear, I won't let them hurt you.
[She leans over and kisses Rhoda]
Good night.

RHODA Good night, mommy. Now will you read to me?

CHRISTINE [Reading] "When Polly was all dressed she found her shawl and crept very quietly out of the room and out the front door. The door creaked, and she waited and listened, but nobody woke up. She closed the door carefully and looked at the bright moon and the shining, cold snow. The Carters must have a tree. They lived two blocks away, and if they left the curtains open you could look in and see it. If only there weren't any dogs. Polly walked carefully on the hard snow on the walk, keeping the warm shawl close around her. It was further than she remembered to the Carters' house, but she could see that there were lights in the windows. She came near it, only making a little creaking noise on the snow, and stood for a while in front of the house before she dared go near. Then she gathered all her courage and walked across the yard, her shoes sinking through the crust. The Christmas tree was right in the front window, and the lights were on in the house, so she could see the fruits and bells and strings of popcorn and candy—and the silver star at the top."
[CHRISTINE pauses and looks at Rhoda. She makes no

sign, and her breathing is deep and regular. CHRISTINE lays down the book]

Rhoda, dear. Rhoda, dear—you are mine, and I carried you, and I can't let them hurt you. I can't let them take you away and shut you up. They'd put you in some kind of institution. Nobody can save you from that unless I save you. So sleep well, and dream well, my only child, and the one I love. I shall sleep, too.

[She gathers Rhoda up in her arms gently, and carries her into the bedroom. After a moment she returns and opens a drawer in a spice cabinet high on the wall, takes out a bunch of keys and goes to the den. There is a shot and the lights go out]

CURTAIN

Act Two

SCENE 4

Morning, a few days later. The sun is shining in at the window and Monica enters from the kitchen with a coffee tray. She sets it down and turns toward the kitchen. Emory, Tasker, and Kenneth come in from the outer hall.

MONICA I've made coffee if anybody wants it.

EMORY That's a thought.

TASKER I'm in favor.

MONICA [*Coming from the kitchen with a plate of sandwiches*]
Kenneth? Coffee?

KENNETH No, thanks, Monica.
[*He goes to the window, looks out*]
Now I must face living without her. Somehow I could almost believe she was still with me till they lowered that coffin into the earth—and I knew I'd never see her face again. Now the earth is empty, and I'm empty.

EMORY She's left all of us feeling pretty much the same way.

KENNETH And why did she do it? Why, in God's name, did she do such a thing? She wasn't unhappy when I left! Monica, she was closer to you than anyone else lately; did she say anything—that was any kind of a reason?

- MONICA I've gone over and over everything she said, till I'm almost distracted—and it just doesn't fit any pattern! And I've talked to everybody who knew her—and they're just incredulous and shocked. There seems to be no reason at all!
- KENNETH There was a reason. Christine didn't do things without a reason.—Her father died suddenly, you said?
- TASKER He'd had a series of attacks, and the news of Christine's death seems to have been too much for his heart.
- EMORY She had some worry or other and I think it was connected with her father.
- TASKER I think she brooded over the Daigle boy's death and about the death of Leroy.
- MONICA She was hysterical at the time of the fire, but that was understandable.
- KENNETH [*To Monica*] When it happened how did you find her? Did you hear the shot?
- MONICA Yes—we heard it—and ran down. She'd shot herself and given Rhoda a deadly dose of sleeping pills. She had obviously planned that they should die together.
- KENNETH Could she—could Christine have been insane?
- TASKER No. We can rule that out. I talked with her not long ago. She shuddered somewhat—at my murder cases—but her comments were completely level-headed.
- EMORY No, Christine wasn't crazy.
- KENNETH I don't know how I'll live. I don't know that I will.
- EMORY I guess nothing helps.
- KENNETH Nothing.—I don't think it's much good without Christine. The army—and promotion—and—a career—it was Christine that kept me afloat—not any of that.

- EMORY She was a wonderful girl.
- KENNETH And she left me—crept away into the earth—and I don't know why!
[*His voice breaks, and he chokes down an uncontrollable sob, then another and another*]
I'm sorry.
- MONICA You cry if you feel like it. She was worth it.
- KENNETH She didn't want to live.

[*The piano in the den is heard playing "Clair de Lune"*]
- MONICA Kenneth, you have a lot to be grateful for. If we hadn't heard the shot you'd have lost Rhoda too.
[*MONICA goes to den, opens door and calls*]
Rhoda.

[*RHODA enters*]
- RHODA Did you like it, daddy? I played it for you.
- KENNETH Oh, Rhoda, my Rhoda, there's a little of Christine left! It's in your smile!
- RHODA I love you, daddy! What will you give me for a basket of kisses?
- KENNETH For a basket of kisses?
[*He looks at Rhoda*]
Oh, my darling—I'll give you a basket of hugs!

[*His arms go round her*]

CURTAIN





MAXWELL ANDERSON was first a teacher, then a newspaper man. His first great hit, "What Price Glory" with Laurence Stallings, started him on his career as one of our foremost American playwrights. His best known plays include ELIZABETH THE QUEEN, BOTH YOUR HOUSES, a Pulitzer Prize play; WINTERSET, which won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award; JOAN OF LORRAINE, ANNE OF THE THOUSAND DAYS, LOST IN THE STARS and, most recently, BAD SEED.